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LADY OF THE NIGHT

BY SYDNEY HORLER

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SYDNEY HORLER

LADY OF THE NIGHT

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TO

F. A. HORNIBROOK

TROUBLE REMOVER

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LADY
OF THE
NIGHT

CHAPTER I

MYSTERY

The particular pride of the P.L.M. Railway Company was racing towards Avignon at a speed which exulted the strong, but caused the timorous to murmur beneath their breath.

Darkness had come; outside was an impenetrable gloom, relieved only now and then by a light in some distant farmhouse or by the fitful illumination of a small station as the great train tore through it with lofty disdain.

But inside this monarch of the rails was well-lit luxury. The P.L.M. Riviera expresses minister to wealth and the great ones of the earth. These demand the best that the world can give—the best food, the best wine, the best service. All were available on this *grand seigneur* of trains, which was carrying to-night an especially distinguished company.

Gerald Holiday, being one of those sophisticates to whom the best had long since become a commonplace, yawned as he glanced at his watch. He wished there was someone to talk to—the journey from Monte Carlo had been tedious. He had read an indifferent novel; had done two crossword puzzles; had written a couple of letters that in any other circumstances he would not have bothered about; lingered longer over dinner than even that excellent meal had justified—and now, here he was, weary with inactivity, not

so much of the body as of the mind. He wished he had returned home by car. That he had not accepted Jim Kelly's decent offer was because of a sudden overwhelming desire to see England again, and, aeroplane apart, this train was the quickest possible route.

He looked at his watch. Half-past nine. The attendant would be coming along shortly to make up the bed. Not that he would be able to sleep—he never could in a train.

He turned leisurely. Here was the attendant now.

But when the door of the *wagon-lit* opened, it was a girl and not a servant in P.L.M. uniform who stepped within.

"Mr. Holiday—" the girl said, and then in a tone of nervous haste: "There is a man outside—please send him away!"

It was because this startling interruption to his boredom had occurred so unexpectedly that Holiday acted quickly. Motioning to the girl to sit down, and smiling, meanwhile, in the endeavour to give her some measure of reassurance, he opened the door of the *wagon-lit* sufficiently to slip through. As he did so, the door of the compartment closed quickly behind him.

Three minutes later he returned to the *wagon-lit*. The intruder, a complete stranger to him, was occupying the seat which he had recently left. She rose immediately, but he waved her back.

"No, stay, please," he said.

"Did you see the man?" she asked.

He smiled at her.

"There was no one in the corridor."

"Are you sure? He might have hidden himself."

"That's not very likely. The occupants of the next three compartments on either side appear to be entirely above suspicion. All their doors were open and I was able to look in. When I have a duty to perform," he added with another smile, "frowns and scowls are mere nothings."

"Thank you," was the reply.

She kept silent for a moment after this, and during that short space of time Holiday took a swift look of appraisement. This girl, whom he was positive he had never seen before, but who had spoken his name without hesitation, offered an exceedingly pleasant sight for a bored man. She was young—not more than twenty-four he should imagine, although he knew how difficult it was correctly to judge a woman's age in these days. Young, and possessing those attributes which should go with youth: a perfect complexion, radiating health, a figure of grace and beauty, and a simple severity of dress which spoke of a famous Paris modiste. She was very fascinating.

"I feel I should explain," she said—and her voice was as distinctively attractive as herself.

"Please don't," he pleaded.

She looked at him in obvious surprise.

"May I offer you a cigarette?" he asked, pulling out a thin gold case.

She shook the head which looked so neat in its plain, tight-fitting black hat.

"I do not smoke; but, tell me, why shouldn't I explain? I break in on you like this——"

"That is the delightful part of the thing," Holiday replied. "Just before you—er—arrived so charmingly, I was feeling terribly bored; it was a wonder I did not do something desperate in sheer weariness of the flesh. I was longing for someone to talk to—the thought did occur of having in one of the attendants and getting him to sing me to sleep—and then—a miracle!—the door opens and you appear! If I may say so, it seemed a direct answer to prayer; can you wonder that I refuse to have the spell broken by listening to any prosaic explanation?"

His companion made a quick start.

"What is the matter?" he asked.

"The door!" she exclaimed quickly.

Holiday had not allowed himself to remark on the fact before, but now it had become unmistakably clear. His visitor was in very real terror.

He moved quickly towards the door, thrust it open, and in doing so, collided with a man.

"Pardon, Monsieur," exclaimed the latter. This, in the ordinary way, Holiday might have considered very decent of him, seeing that it was the other who had received the biff. But he remembered the expression of fear on the face of the girl, and looked at the man sternly.

"What are you doing here?" he demanded.

The other, who had the appearance of a second-class *maître d'hôtel* off duty, shrugged his shoulders.

"Is it not permitted for me to take the air in the corridor?" he replied in English.

"Certainly. But I prefer you not to breathe it too near this compartment."

The man seemed to be contemplating some spirited retort. But none came: shrugging his shoulders again, he glared venomously at the Englishman and then walked away.

"I don't think you will be worried any more." In spite of his earlier assurance, a dozen questions were framing themselves in his mind. Who was this girl? Why was she afraid? What hold could that unhealthy-looking foreigner have over her? The two, by every possible standard of comparison, were poles apart.

"I do so want to explain," she said.

This time Holiday remained silent. He endeavoured to give her encouragement by another smile.

But the explanation, when it came, was somewhat disjointed.

"That man—was he small, very foreign-looking, with a large mole on his left cheek?" she first asked.

"Yes—a very greasy brute altogether. He wanted to be insolent."

The girl nodded.

"He was annoyed, no doubt, because I had escaped. He may look commonplace, but he is dangerous. In fact——" and here she broke off.

Then: "Are you going straight to London, Mr. Holiday?"

"Yes," he answered.

"You are wondering how I know your name." This

time there did come an explanation. "You were pointed out to me at the Hermitage Hotel at Monte Carlo."

Holiday determined to obtain something direct.

"In what way can I be of service to you?"

In reply, she looked once more towards the door.

Then she answered: "As you are going straight to London, Mr. Holiday, will you do me a favour? I know it's a great deal to ask a stranger——"

Her companion made a mock gesture.

"How dare you call me a stranger? Haven't we known each other for every single one of the past ten minutes? Haven't I not only guarded the portals, but sent Suet-Face about his business?" Then more seriously, and before he realized exactly what he was saying: "I shall be delighted, of course. What is it you wish me to do?"

"I want you"—again that nervous glance towards the door—"to do me a small service. But"—quickly—"perhaps I ought not to ask you. There is a possible risk."

"From the gentleman in question?" He pointed to the door.

"From him and the men who work with him."

"What are they? Crooks?"

"Worse," she assured him.

"But——"

"I know it all sounds very mysterious and impossible, but I am in deadly earnest, Mr. Holiday. And to make matters worse, I cannot fully explain—I mean, I am not at liberty to say any more."

"Then don't. I'll do anything you want."

She leaned forward and touched his arm. Her eyes were shining with excitement; the lips of the rather large but beautiful mouth parted to show exquisite teeth.

"I cannot thank you sufficiently."

"You've already done so," he said.

"I?—how?"

"By spending the last quarter of an hour in my *wagon-lit,* and finally dispelling my boredom."

The reply acted as a douche.

"Please do not misunderstand me: I chose you because you were English."

"I'm half-American," he countered with a smile.

If he had not been looking straight at her, he would have permitted himself another grin. The situation was becoming more and more farcical. The girl was certainly charming; but was she not a little—well, unbalanced? Her dread was certainly real, unless she had marvellous acting powers; but at the same time, might it not be imaginary? The man he had seen in the corridor had had a shifty eye, but that may have been his misfortune as much as his fault. But because she was English, because she had appealed to him, and principally because he had given his promise, he was going to treat the matter seriously.

"What is it you wish me to do?" he asked.

"Would you mind not looking this way for a minute?" There was a pretty confusion in her tone which he found irresistible. But, of course, he complied with the request.

Had he been asked to hazard a guess, Holiday would have admitted to himself—but to no one else—that he be-

lieved the girl had produced what looked like a beautifully-embossed card-case, which she now held towards him, from the upper regions of one of her silk stockings. But what of that in this year of grace?

"May I turn round now?" he asked after what he considered a sufficient pause.

"Yes."

Her face was flushed as she held out the case. But even this confusion did not drive out the ever-present fear.

"Quickly!" she urged; "no one must see. Tell me, where are you going to put it?"

He opened his coat and showed her the inside pocket.

"I promise you it will be safe there," he said, feeling bewildered. What could the thing contain?

But she was not satisfied.

"You might be attacked—that's the first place a thief would suspect."

To humour her, he reached up and pulled down a leather portfolio.

"I keep my cheque-book and money in this," he said; "it has a strong lock."

"It might be snatched out of your hand."

"It won't," he declared decisively, and with that she appeared content.

"I want you to understand, Mr. Holiday," she said, rising, "that although I cannot explain, it is vitally important. This case must be taken——"

Still intent on humouring her, he nodded.

"I promise you it shall be delivered—but may I remind you that I do not yet know the address?"

"What a fool!" she exclaimed in bitter self-reproach. She came close to him and whispered a few words.

"Can you remember?"

"I think so."

"Repeat it, please."

He did so, having at the same time what he knew to be an insane desire to put out his arms and draw this enchanting if provocative creature within them.

"And now I must go."

The words—commonplace, belonging as they did to the fixed and steady routine of life instead of the dizzy tumult of the past twenty minutes—brought a frown to the tanned forehead.

"But you mustn't go," he replied.

An expression, in which annoyance and bewilderment seemed equally mixed, leapt into her face.

"I mean I hate to think of you being on your own again," said Holiday hastily; "you may have further trouble with that fellow."

"I must risk that." She stepped towards the door. "Now that you have given me your promise, I am not afraid."

It was utterly bewildering, but it seemed impossible to ask any further questions. He had served his purpose, and now she was anxious to be rid of him. It was an annoying reflection.

"At least let me take you to your *wagon-lit?"* he suggested.

"No—please. It would be better for us not to be seen together. The danger——" And then she had opened the door. "Thank you once again," she said, and was gone.

Holiday muttered an oath. He felt exasperated beyond expression. The whole thing was utterly preposterous. He did not even know her name.

A knock, and he flung the door open. Perhaps she had returned.

But it was merely the attendant come to make up the bed.

Holiday's first inclination was to go for a walk in the corridor whilst the man performed his task. Then he remembered the portfolio in the rack—and, unwillingly enough, stayed where he was.

The man, having done his job, left. Holiday lit a cigarette and tried to reason out the situation. One of two things was certain: either the girl had actually been unbalanced, or he had allowed himself to be persuaded to do something which was crooked.

Holiday was not imaginative. His was the healthily prosaic mind of the average well-bred man of the world. The highly coloured stories he had heard on the Riviera about ruined gamblers committing suicide, and international crooks "lifting" jewels worth a fortune, left him cold. Seeing was believing: he hadn't seen, therefore he didn't believe; and in any case that phase of life had no interest for him. If a crook of any sort tackled him, he imagined he would know how to deal with the fellow, but beyond that, he had never given the subject a thought, absorbing as it

had appeared to be to so many of the men and women he had forgathered with along the Côte d'Azur.

But this girl——?

Recollections of a talk he had had in the Hermitage Hotel at Monte Carlo returned.

"This place, you must remember, is the happy hunting-ground of a great number of dangerous women," his informant, who professed to know a good deal about life in the underworld of crime, had said; "and often the more innocent and well-bred they appear, the more unscrupulous they are. Watch out for young and attractive women who want you to do them a favour."

"You bet I will," he had replied. He had excused himself a few moments later, pleading a tennis engagement. What rot some of these blighters talked! This was his fifth winter in the South of France and he had never had any experience of that sort. Blatant women, yes—women who carried their trade in their face, certainly—but never one of the other type. If he had chanced his luck, he might have had a fair-ish number of "affairs," no doubt—but he went to the Riviera for sport, not to hunt women.

But this girl——?

She was young, attractive, obviously well-born. . . . But a crook? Never!

Still doubts remained. Why all the mystery which, instead of being impressive, had verged on the farcical? Why couldn't she have explained? And why not have given her name?

Suddenly he thought he had hit on the secret. That card-case, small as it was, possibly contained something which she wanted smuggled through the Customs, but which she was afraid to have found on her own person! That must mean that she was a suspect; the authorities knew her.

But to think that she should have taken him for a mug! That was the part which stung. And then to talk about "the risk."

He'd have a look at that case—open it. With one hand uplifted to fetch down the portfolio, however, he stopped. That wouldn't be quite playing the game. He'd carry on, deliver the thing—there would be no danger of forgetting the address; he had always possessed a remarkable memory—and that would be an end.

The train slowing down told him that they must be nearing Avignon. The stop might give him an opportunity of seeing the girl again. In direct contrast to the annoyance he had felt a minute before, the anticipation was pleasurable—distinctly so.

Half an hour later, the express came to a stand-still at the spacious Avignon station.

Almost immediately afterwards, Holiday heard a cry. It consisted of a single word—an ominous word.

Murder!

CHAPTER II

THE COMMISSAIRE GETS A SURPRISE

WHY, at the stabbing of the air with that sinister cry, he should have thought instantly of his recent visitor, he could not have told. It was sufficient that the picture had come—the picture of a girl in the full flower of her radiant beauty now lying cold and still. . . .

It must have been that skulking swine who had done it. The man could not be allowed to escape.

When he flung the door open a pandemonium of sound beat upon his ears. He grabbed a passing attendant by the arm.

"What has happened?"

The man had perspiration running down his face. His eyes were blazing with excitement.

"Monsieur! A terrible crime has been committed . . . murder . . . a knife in the breast. . . ."

Holiday had a second swift, horrible vision.

"Man or woman?"

"Woman, Monsieur—a beautiful . . ."

That was sufficient.

"Where?" he snapped.

The attendant pointed down the train.

Even in that tense moment Holiday could not forget his trust.

"Stay here and watch my luggage," he said, pushing a hundred-franc note into the man's hand. "If anything is stolen, I shall hold you responsible. Understand?"

"But certainly, Monsieur. You can be satisfied that nothing will be disturbed."

Holiday, in the ordinary way, was not a precipitate person, but, in this instance, he acted on impulse. The first *gendarme* he saw—and the French police had appeared with miraculous swiftness—he touched on the arm.

"I have some information to give concerning this crime," he said.

The *gendarme* accepted the news with Gallic alacrity.

"Monsieur will tell the Commissaire. He is coming now." He pointed to a stout, bearded man, pompous-looking and yet giving an impression of acute intelligence, who could be seen walking along the corridor.

"Where is the body?" asked Holiday.

"The police-surgeon is now making his examination. Afterwards Monsieur will be permitted to visit the compartment. But here is M. Lebrun, the Commissaire." He stepped forward, saluted, and spoke to the higher police official.

M. Lebrun motioned the Englishman to a seat. The shabby clerk who accompanied him at once produced a notebook. The occupants of the *wagon-lit* which had been appropriated for the inquiry looked on curiously through the window.

"This is a terrible crime," began the Commissaire of Police; "permit me to ask your name, Monsieur?"

"Holiday—Gerald Holiday."

"You are English?"

"Yes. Look here, before we go any farther, I know——"

"All in sequence, Monsieur. Permit me to conduct this examination in my own manner. Believe me, that is important."

"Not so important as allowing the murderer to escape."

"Mon Dieu! You saw the crime committed? You could identify the assassin?"

"Yes, I am sure I should be able to recognize the man again. Of course, I couldn't swear that he actually committed the crime, but—you had better hear the story from the beginning."

"That would be best," was the dry comment. "But, first, a description of the person you believe to be the assassin."

Holiday gave the best verbal portrait he could of the man he had ordered away from his *wagon-lit*. The *gendarme* on duty outside the door was called.

"If that man is in Avignon to-night, we shall have him!" declared M. Lebrun impressively; "in any case, he will not be allowed to leave France. And now, Monsieur. . . ."

As simply as possible Holiday told his story—part of his story. There was a certain portion—that about the card-case —which he decided to leave out. He stated that an hour previous a young Englishwoman had asked for his protection against a man who had been molesting her, and of whom she was in terror. It was this man he had found skulking outside his *wagon-lit,* and whose description he had just given.

"Mademoiselle was a stranger to you, Monsieur?"

"An absolute stranger. But, being English, she naturally

would make such an appeal to a fellow countryman."

"Assuredly." The Commissaire acknowledged the point.

"Did she explain why she was afraid of this man?"

"No. I tried to obtain the reason, but she was reluctant to tell me. Because questions added to her confusion, I did not press her. As a matter of fact, I had the idea at the time that she was very over-wrought and perhaps was exaggerating somewhat—unconsciously, of course."

"It is impossible to exaggerate a fear which has led to murder," declared the Commissaire solemnly.

"I admit that. And I am extremely sorry now that I did not do what I intended."

"And that, Monsieur?"

"I thought of asking Mademoiselle to stay in my *wagon-lit* for the rest of the journey."

"If you had done so, this dastardly crime would assuredly have been averted." There was a suggestion of rebuke in the official's manner.

"I know," replied the Englishman in exasperation; "but I want you to understand that beyond telling me about being terrified of this man, Mademoiselle——"

The Commissaire looked up sharply.

"What name did Mademoiselle give, Monsieur?"

"She didn't give me any name."

"Have you seen the body?" now sharply inquired the official, who looked surprised at the last reply.

"No. The *gendarme* told me that the police-surgeon was making his examination and that I should be asked to go along later."

"You must come immediately." Something seemed to be disturbing the Commissaire very considerably.

Holiday prepared himself for an ordeal. He would never be able to forgive himself for allowing the girl to leave. He should have kept her in the compartment, even against her will. Also, he should have lodged a complaint against the man and had him held in custody until Avignon, the first stop, was reached, when he could have been handed over to the police.

"If you please, Monsieur."

The Commissaire had unlocked the door of a compartment with a certain unconscious flourish. In spite of the *gendarmes,* the dense crowd which had gathered attempted to force their way in. The blinds had been drawn on the platform side, thus robbing them of what they correctly judged was a morbid spectacle.

Stretched on the floor was a woman's body. Holiday could see the handle of a knife protruding from the breast.

A second look, and he flung himself round.

"This isn't the woman!" he said.

CHAPTER III

THE SECOND ACT

M. Lebrun pushed impatient fingers through his beard.

"Not the same woman!" he repeated. "Are you certain, Monsieur?"

"I'm positive," replied Holiday, and in his voice was a great relief; "this is not the girl who asked for my help. She was dark, had a slim figure, and was dressed in fawn. I regret I should have misled you, M. Lebrun."

The Commissaire held up a hand. The gesture was arresting.

"Did Mademoiselle tell you the number of her compartment?"

"No."

"I will ask the conductor. I have no doubt that this unfortunate girl was mistaken for Mademoiselle, and murdered in her place."

"That's possible," agreed Holiday. The mystery had deepened. A sense of tremendous thankfulness had come to him upon discovering that the murdered woman was not the girl who had entered his *wagon-lit,* but now he wished to be dissociated from the whole thing. This was the first time he had been brought into close touch with a violent crime, and the experience was nauseating.

"Here is my card, M. le Commissaire. If you should want me again, you can write to that address."

"Monsieur, I offer you my best thanks."

Back in his own compartment, Holiday did not dismiss the attendant he had placed on guard until he had ascertained that both the portfolio and the case he had placed in it were safe. Had he been foolish to run such a risk? What value was placed on that case by certain people, the recent terrible crime was proof. There was little doubt in his own mind about the accuracy of the Police Commissaire's opinion; in the darkness one girl had been mistaken for the other—and had paid a terrible penalty: it was ghastly to think about.

But where was the other girl? Why had she not come forward? The answer to this seemed to be that she must have left the train before the tragedy was discovered. Now he came to ponder over the affair, he remembered that the train had slowed up for about five minutes outside Avignon. If the girl had wanted to leave the train unobserved, it might have been possible for her to have done so during this time.

He lit a cigarette and endeavoured to divert his thoughts. This business reeked of intrigue and sordid crime. He was fed up with it. He would deliver the case—and that would be an end so far as he was concerned. An absolute end.

So he resolved. . . .

As he locked his bedroom door an hour later, Holiday had a feeling of relief. At the request of the Commissaire of Police, he had consented to spend the night at Avignon instead of proceeding direct to Paris. It was possible, the offi-

cial stated, that the man suspected of committing this crime would be arrested before the morning, and M. Lebrun desired him to give evidence of identification. Although anxious to get to England, he had had no option, in the circumstances, but to agree to the demand.

How long he had been asleep he did not know, but he awoke with a start, nerves tensed. The sixth sense which comes to a man when he is in danger, kept him motionless for a moment, listening intently.

Someone was in the room.

Although he was wide-awake, his brain was not functioning very well. Had the whisky-and-soda he had ordered the last thing been tampered with? What he wanted to do—what he ought to do—he knew was to get quietly out of bed on the side farthest from the door. He might then be able to tackle the visitor from the rear.

But something appeared to have a paralysing effect upon him. He remained still, as though he had been drugged. Had that whisky been doped? It seemed ridiculous to assume so, and yet——

Then the spell of lethargy suddenly snapped. He was himself again. He had cast off the shackles of irresolution. Very cautiously he pulled back the clothes and started to get out of bed.

As he did so a voice, soft, but sinister, said: "You will remain still, Monsieur Holiday. I have a revolver here, and it is quite likely to go off if you are not sensible!"

In spite of the warning, Holiday's hand shot upwards. It found the electric-light switch and pressed it.

"I thought I'd like a look at you, my friend," he explained.

The man, who was wearing a mask and holding a revolver too close to his face to be pleasant, shot out an oath.

"We've met before to-night, I think," continued Holiday; "on the express, was it not?" Although he was not able to see the intruder's features because of the mask, yet the man's figure reminded him of the skulker outside his *wagon-lit*. He felt sure it was the same man. "Don't you think you had better put that revolver away?—it might go off."

"Assuredly it will go off unless you stop your stupid tongue. Come, I have no time to waste; where is what that girl gave you?"

Holiday yawned.

"My dear, good ass, I like your impudence! Fancy waking a man up in order to ask him what sounds like a ridiculous riddle! What on earth do you mean?" If he could induce the other to believe that he was first-cousin to a fool, he might be able later to turn the tables. He had to chance his arm because, at the moment, the other held all the cards.

"I want what the Englishwoman gave you on the train. A thousand devils! Do you think I intend to wait here all night?"

Holiday yawned.

"My dear old sausage, let me remind you that the question of how long you wait is a matter entirely for yourself. Personally, I'd be awfully glad if you'd pop off at once. I want some sleep."

"You'll sleep for good if you try any more of that funny stuff with me. Listen! I've done one murder to-night."

The man he threatened gave a shrill cry of alarm that was not entirely simulated.

"I say, don't talk like that!—you make me feel nervous!" he expostulated. "And I'm getting tired of this rot about a package. You've got a fine nerve, I must say, breaking into a fellow's bedroom and holding him up at the point of a revolver. What do you mean by it?"

The answer was disconcerting. The revolver advanced: its hard nose was pressed against Holiday's left ear.

"You have talked enough," came the hissed warning; "get up and open your luggage."

"All right—if that will satisfy you." Holiday, seething with rage, succeeded somehow in keeping his tone nonchalant. He knew that his life might be measured by seconds. This man, whose hands were already stained with the blood of one victim that night, would not hesitate to shoot if he received any further provocation. The only chance he had was to try to put him off his guard. He would only want the merest chance, he promised himself. In the meantime, he got out of bed.

"There are my keys." He pointed to his trousers, which were hanging on the bedrail. "Perhaps you would like to open the things?" he suggested.

"Use them yourself—you can't catch me like that," was the reply.

Shrugging his shoulders as though he could not understand the other's attitude, Holiday reached for the trousers. With the garments in his hand, he measured the distance between them.

Then, swiftly, he leapt—sideways.

The bark of the revolver filled the room. Before the man could fire again, Holiday was on him, cramming the trousers over his face and head.

Only the barest chance he had wanted—and now by quick thinking and a piece of luck, this had come. Catching the man by the throat from the back, he squeezed without mercy.

"Drop that gun, or I'll finish you!" he said.

A snarl came from the tortured throat.

"Very well," applying still greater force, "the police, who are already searching Avignon for you, will not consider it any crime to kill such a snake."

The revolver dropped.

Thrusting out a foot and kicking the weapon away, Holiday endeavoured to throw the man to the ground. He was determined to hand him over to justice. He had never had the chance to handle a murderer before, but he meant to do this job thoroughly.

Once he had lost his revolver, the other fought like a badgered wolf, as a Paris Apache fights when forced into a corner. Every foul trick that can be learnt in the stews of the criminal underworld he tried—and one or two of them came off.

Outside the door, men were hammering. As he fought this vile beast, who had just sunk his teeth into his hand, Holiday guessed how the other had entered the room. It must have been through the window.

Like a couple of dogs, close-locked, the pair squirmed on the floor. Holiday was far-spent: the end was near—one

way or the other. He intended to kill if he had the chance, and so did his enemy.

Over and over they rolled. Furniture crashed and fell about them. Yet nothing interrupted the struggle: both were indifferent to every element except that instinctive and primal lust to slay.

Holiday found himself with his head against the window. It was of the French type, the glass extending to the floor of the room, and with the opening in the centre.

Quickly he had an inspiration: rallying all his remaining energy, he leaned forward, caught the man by the shoulders and hurled him backwards. Where he had obtained the necessary strength always remained a mystery, but the next moment he heard his foe crashing through the glass. A thud followed.

A second later there was another crash. The door burst open and a number of people poured into the room.

A man in the highest state of agitation, whom he recognized as the hotel manager, spluttered incoherently for at least a minute. During this period Holiday was too intent on regaining his breath to have any to spare. At last, however, he replied.

"A man, who is a desperate criminal and a murderer, got into this room. I fought with him and flung him out of the window. He is lying in the courtyard now. Please call the police and have him arrested."

Directly the manager was able to recover from his astonishment—which was not until another couple of minutes

had passed—he issued the necessary orders. In the meantime, Holiday fumed.

"The man will escape!" he shouted.

The manager looked at him with the expression his class reserves for the mad Englishman.

"Monsieur, a dead man cannot run—it is thirty feet from this window—which assuredly Monsieur will pay to have repaired?—to the courtyard."

But how sound was the Englishman's presentiment, was proved when the servants who returned from below announced that there was no sign of any man—whole, injured, or dead. Holiday cursed afresh; not that this outpouring could do any good. For himself he did not care—he felt rather bucked, as a matter of fact, with the result of the recent scrap—but he realized that as long as this fiend was at large, so long would the life of the mysterious, but beautiful girl he had promised to serve be in danger.

And that was anything but a pleasurable reflection.

There was no more sleep for him that night, anyway. Dawn found him keeping watch with the murderer's revolver, which he had decided to retain as a trophy of the chase.

Nothing happened. Yet he had the idea—and his ideas were proving winners all along the line—that this was merely a lull before another storm.

CHAPTER IV

THE MAN WHO LOOKED LIKE FALSTAFF

After so much elaborate French cooking it was refreshing to eat a simple English meal. As he asked the waiter to serve coffee and liqueurs, Holiday gave a sigh of satisfaction.

"Glad to be back?" inquired Peter Traill.

"My son," the returned voyager answered emphatically, "I am infernally glad to be back. Nothing will prevent me staying in England for at least another six months. I have spoken."

His companion assumed a paternal air.

"The trouble with you, Holiday, is that you have no proper grip on life. Oh, I know you're supposed to be one of the best six polo-players in the world; but what of it? There are more important things than hitting an inoffensive ball about with an elongated croquet-mallet. Why don't you follow my distinguished example and do something useful?"

"Such as?"

"Well, you might permit me to invest some of your ill-gotten wealth in one or two promising companies my firm are thinking of promoting."

"Between the Devil and the Stock Exchange jobber what difference is there?" scoffed Holiday. "If you are hard up, Peter, you can call on me for any reasonable amount—you

must know that without my telling you—but I'll be hanged if I'm going to allow you to play havoc with the few quid which keep me from rattling at the workhouse door. All the same, old man," he added in a change of tone, "I do get tired of things sometimes."

"There's always marriage," suggested Traill, lighting a cigarette. "With your money and connections both here and in the States, scores of 'em would come running at the lifting of a finger. It's rather more hazardous than polo, but it would certainly keep you occupied."

The other frowned.

"It's the lifting of the finger that does it, Peter. Women have never been much in my line, as you know, and when I am l-loved, I want it to be for myself alone. What is it about herbs and the stalled ox?"

"Ass!" declared Traill, but beneath the persiflage he knew the other was serious. Why Gerald Holiday had not already settled down, had formed a topic of gossip in his set for some time. American on his mother's side, British on his father's, possessing birth, position, good looks, and ample means, Holiday represented a matrimonial prize which even the haughtiest of duchess mothers would have welcomed. But —women had never seemed to exert any appeal to this favourite of the gods. He had devoted himself, instead, to sport, and this attraction had proved sufficient.

Up till now. But, sitting in the lounge of the Berkeley, watching the distinguished company enter and depart, Holiday found himself strangely discontented. This was the spot in all the world that he liked the best—the place for which

he had a genuine affection—and yet the moment to which he had looked forward since a week before leaving Monte Carlo, was savourless. During the past forty-eight hours he had been thinking of one subject, and his mind was still occupied with it. When would he see that girl again?

"Afraid I'm very poor company to-night, Peter," he confessed. "Let's talk about yourself for a change. What's been happening?"

"Oh, nothing very much," replied the other; "what should happen to such a humdrum person as myself? Forced by a cruel and relentless fate to meander down to the Stock Exchange every day——"

"I like that. You know what the *Morning Moon* says about your abominable sloth on a Saturday, I suppose?"

Holiday, who had expected some kind of heated reply, looked at his companion. In some subtle, but unmistakable way Traill had changed. His former indolence of manner had been replaced by an alertness which reminded Holiday of a dog scenting danger. So unexpected and remarkable was this transition that he could scarcely believe it was Traill at whom he was looking. Why should anyone following so dull an existence as a Stock Exchange jobber assume such an attitude—and in one of London's most select restaurants, too? It was interesting. He followed the direction of Traill's eyes.

Moving towards the door were a man and woman. Both were arresting figures, but it was the former who held Holiday's gaze.

Of comparatively small stature, this man was so ample in

girth that he must have weighed at least eighteen stone. He waddled instead of walked. Above the thick neck was a round, fat, clean-shaven face wreathed in a smile that seemed comprehensive enough to embrace all mankind. The man, whose age, Holiday estimated, was between forty-five and fifty, was practically bald; with the exception of a small area, sandy-coloured, at the back, the great skull was hairless. The skin was slightly flushed, as though the man had done himself extremely well at dinner.

Beyond the fact that she was very attractive in a somewhat opulent manner, Holiday paid no attention to the woman who walked by the side of this human curio: it was the man who interested him.

He heard Traill make some exclamation which he was unable to catch, and then the fat man turned his head. This action may have been due to some word or signal from his companion, but, whatever the cause, Holiday saw a pair of narrow-slit, beady eyes regarding him intently. It was these eyes that gave the man away: whilst the rest of his face was an invitation to the world to share the merry jest of life, the eyes were cold, astute, and calculating.

The scrutiny was very brief—it lasted for only a few seconds—but when the moon of a face turned away, Holiday felt that the man had tried to look right into his mind. It was a somewhat uncanny experience. He had a prickly sensation down his back. The man, ridiculous as was his appearance, had given him a sensation, if not of actual fear, certainly of uneasiness.

And it must have been this same man who had

caused Traill to betray himself. He desired information.

"Who is the Falstaff in modern dress, Peter?" he asked.

Traill did not reply immediately. He was watching the pair leave the restaurant.

"Falstaff?" he repeated, after the couple had disappeared.

"Don't be an ass," said Holiday, on the verge of impatience. "I mean that fellow who passed a minute ago. He was extraordinary enough to cause half the people here to stare at him. And you yourself muttered something which I couldn't catch."

Traill laughed.

"My dear old chap, you're imagining things what ain't! Tell me, why should I utter maledictions in my beard because a man who is about eight stone over-weight crosses my path?"

"If you don't care to tell me, please yourself, of course," was the retort. "I have far too many grisly secrets of my own to wish to share any of yours."

"What is it you want to know about the fellow?" asked Traill in a change of tone.

"So you do have the honour of the gentleman's acquaintance?"

His companion hesitated momentarily.

"I happen to have heard of him," he then replied. "I am told he's a crook."

"A crook?" Holiday laughed at the thought which had come to him. "A crook with a stomach like that! Why, he couldn't run a yard!"

"It's not his body he uses, it's his brain. That, I have been

informed, is active enough." Traill, who had spoken seriously, seemed anxious to change the subject. "What about doing a show of some sort?" he asked.

Holiday shook his head.

"Can't to-night. Sorry, but I have an engagement. Let's stop here for another few minutes, unless you're in a tearing hurry; you've no idea how interesting your conversation is."

"I am becomingly grateful for the nuts. Now unbosom; what's on your mind?"

For a moment Holiday was tempted to tell this friend—whom he knew he could trust—the strange adventure he had had whilst returning from Monte Carlo. For a reason which he was unable to define, he resisted the inclination, and came to the matter immediately in his mind.

"I should like some additional information about friend Falstaff," he said; "it may be merely imagination, but all the same, I wouldn't mind making a small bet that you know a bit more about that fellow than you have unburdened. Right or wrong?"

"Why should I know much about the man?"

"Don't ask me, Mr. Mystery. As I've already stated, I have no wish to pry into your horrible past. The only reason I made the inquiry was because that fellow—by the way, what's his name?"

"I'm told it's Stadenfeld."

"Christian name?"

"Aubrey."

"He looks an Aubrey—fat and fulsome. Well, as I was saying, he gave me what I think I rightly interpreted as a real

nasty look when he went by. I'm human enough to want to know why."

"Afraid I can't tell you," replied Traill, rising. "All I can advise you regarding that man, is to keep out of his way. He's dangerous, and if only I had the chance, I'd scotch him like a poisonous snake. He's a crook, and perhaps the woman who was with him knows you—or your banking account, which is equally important from their point of view—by reputation. There's a considerable amount of blackmail going on in London just about now, so don't put yourself into a false position, old man, with any too charming a charmer."

"You're wandering," commented Holiday caustically.

"All right," replied the other, unperturbed, "only, the best of us have our off-moments; don't forget that. And every rich man is a possible prey for the sharks who work in London nowadays. I need scarcely say that if you do ever get into any trouble, I'll do my best to help you out."

"You?"

"I happen to know the Chief Commissioner of Scotland Yard rather well," Traill replied, with an air of nonchalance.

CHAPTER V

THE DARK HOUSE

For the second time within a few hours, Holiday stood outside the house. In the darkness it looked more forbidding than before.

Taviton Street, W.C. 1, had not presented too pleasing an appearance when he first made its acquaintance that afternoon. It cut through one of the least respectable parts of Bloomsbury, and it had a faded, vaguely disreputable air. It was a street gone to seed; a street that, having seen better days, had now given up the struggle to maintain its former position. Like a man who has lost his character, it seemed to accept misfortune without protest or challenge.

No. 33 stood almost in the centre, on the right-hand side. It was a tall, dingy, gloomy building, that once might have been the handsome dwelling of a rich City merchant. Now it was apparently let off in flats—which were probably not even self-contained. The person Bishop, to whom he was to deliver the card-case, evidently lived upstairs.

He pressed the bell and awaited results. He had rather an eerie feeling—the thought would not shut itself out of his mind that one actual murder and one attempted killing (his own) had already been caused through the small flat case which was in the breast-pocket of his coat. It was difficult

to judge what fresh danger he might be walking into. He would cut short the interview: once he saw this man Bishop, he would get him to hand over a receipt for the thing, and then the business would be disposed of finally.

He continued to wait. No answer had come to his ring. Suppose the fellow was still not at home—would he have to trot round to this dismal and depressing street every day until he finally showed himself? The man might be abroad, or, again, he might be dead. A family relation of the Riviera express murderer might have struck him down with the same ruthlessness as was shown to that unsuspecting and defenceless girl.

Holiday, uneasy through these fresh reflections, pressed the bell again. He kept his finger longer on it this time.

After some seconds, he had his reward. Footsteps could be heard approaching. There was the sound of a bolt being withdrawn and the door cautiously opened.

"Yes?" inquired a voice.

No light had been switched on in the hall behind the speaker, so that Holiday was unable to see his face.

"Is Mr. Bishop in?" he asked.

There was a pause.

"Have you any business with Mr. Bishop?"

"I have—and it's important.

"What is your name, please?"

"My name doesn't matter; if I gave it you, Mr. Bishop would not be any the wiser, because I am a stranger to him. Please tell him my business will not take more than a minute or so, but that it is vitally important."

"Very well—please come in."

Holiday did not care overmuch for that dark hall.

"Aren't you going to turn on a light?" he asked. "I don't particularly want to break my neck."

There was a muttered apology.

"Yes, of course," Holiday heard the other say. Then came a click.

The light, coming from a stained-glass fitting, was not very good, but it enabled the visitor to survey his surroundings. He was in a large hall, shabbily furnished, from which a wide staircase led upwards.

"Will you please follow me," said the man.

The latter, who looked like a poorly-paid man-servant, kept his face averted. He began to walk up the stairs.

"One minute. Mr. Bishop is in, I suppose?"

"Yes—he's in," admitted the guide, without turning his head.

Holiday asked no further questions, but kept his wits about him. Up three flights of the wide staircase the man went, and then stopped before the front door of what appeared to be a self-contained flat. This the guide opened with a Yale key.

"I will tell Mr. Bishop, if you will kindly wait a moment," he said.

Holiday was inclined to make some sarcastic remark before remembering that perhaps all this preamble was necessary. The man he had come to see evidently believed in taking precautions. No doubt he had his reasons.

"This way, please."

Even now he could not get a good look at the speaker's

face. But he soon forgot the servant when he was ushered into a large, square room. It was the man's employer who interested him.

"You wished to see me?"

A man was standing before the fire.

Holiday stared. Surprise kept him silent.

For the speaker was the man Stadenfeld, who had looked at him so intently in the Berkeley lounge less than an hour before. Friend Falstaff, no less.

"I understand you wished to see me." The man had a thin, almost squeaky voice, which afforded a striking contrast to his immense girth. The combination of the two was ludicrous.

"I certainly wished to see Mr. Bishop." That the other was an impostor seemed certain. Apart from Peter Traill's information, there was the conviction that the girl who had entrusted him with the case could never have allowed herself any association with this man. The self-styled Bishop, now he came to look at him, was a distinctly unpleasant object. In spite of his smile, his well-cut clothes, and his good grooming, he looked like a human toad. Evil emanated from him.

"I am Bishop—please tell me your business. But," the detestable smile broadening, "to prove my bona fides, as it were, I will explain why you have called on me. Your name is Gerald Holiday; you are a sportsman of international reputation. On Wednesday, whilst returning to England from the Riviera, you experienced a romantic adventure. You were asked by a young lady of extremely attractive appearance to

take charge of something which you promised to deliver to me at this address. Am I correct?"

"In some respects," replied the visitor. A desire to wipe that nauseating smile off the other's moon of a face became irresistible. His dislike of this man was instinctive.

"Why only in some respects, Mr. Holiday?"

"What I promised was to deliver something to a person named Bishop."

The other stamped his foot in what Holiday was convinced was merely a pretence of anger. Then, once more, the odious smile bloomed.

"Have I not already told you my name is Bishop?" he asked.

"You have certainly told me so."

"You want further proof?"

"I think it would be advisable. I have no knowledge what this particular something contains, but I do know that one serious crime has been committed because of it, and—well, it naturally makes me feel cautious."

"Quite so. And now for this further proof of my identity. How can I hope to convince you?"

Holiday, recognizing the awkwardness of the question, decided on a bluff.

"To begin with," he said, "you do not correspond at all with the physical description of Bishop given me by the young lady who entrusted me with the mission."

"Indeed? I can only suggest that she confused my description with that of someone else."

"That's hardly likely, I think. So, in the circumstances, I

am afraid I must wish you good evening, Mr. Stadenfeld."

The flash which had come into the other's narrow-slit eyes was gone the next second, but the man had betrayed himself.

His control, otherwise, however, was masterly.

"Stadenfeld—you are making a mistake, my friend: Bishop is my name, as I have already told you several times. You seem a difficult person to persuade."

"Yes," agreed the caller. "I must admit I am still far from being convinced that you are the man intended to receive what was entrusted to me. That being so, I do not intend to waste any further time." He turned towards the door.

"Wait!" called the man.

What caused Holiday to turn was the thought that the other might be covering him with a revolver.

"Honestly, I shouldn't advise you to do anything so foolish," he said as he swung round.

To his surprise the man did not display a weapon. Stadenfeld was in an attitude of reflection beside the mantelpiece.

"I am trying hard, Mr. Holiday, to think of a way in which I can convince you that I really am Bishop," he said, so pleasantly that the recent conversation appeared to have had no effect upon him. "You see my difficulty," he went on. "We are complete strangers to each other. If I showed you letters addressed to me at this house, you would still have doubts, I suppose?"

"I should. That is why I am leaving."

"The situation is very embarrassing. How to convince you I do not know." As he spoke, Holiday noticed his right hand

pass behind his back. Was the man pressing a bell, or feeling for a revolver in an unseen pocket of his coat?

"I don't like to see that right hand of yours disappearing, Mr. Stadenfeld."

"You are still labouring under that same foolish impression, I see." The words were accompanied by a perfectly dazzling smile. "Dear me, if I could only convince you! Because, you see, it is vitally important that I should have that article." A note of quiet menace had crept into the ridiculous voice. It was so insidious that it was scarcely discernible, and yet it affected Holiday keenly.

"I am afraid you must bring yourself to being disappointed, then," he said.

A couple of paces brought him to the door. He put his hand on the knob and immediately withdrew it—racked with pain. He glared at the smiling Stadenfeld.

"A little necessary precaution, my dear Mr. Holiday," said the latter. "We members of the British Secret Service are occasionally visited by dangerous characters. That," with a slight pause, "is the reason why the door-knob of this room is electrified. I am quite sure you will understand now that I have made this explanation."

Holiday became coldly angry.

"You imagine that you will prevent me from leaving?"

"I have such an idea." The smile was even more prominent.

"Well, let me tell you that you're mistaken. I should hate to put my hands on a creature like you, but, all the same, if that door isn't opened inside half a minute I'll hit you—

once. That will be sufficient." Anger was scattering to the four winds what little discretion he had left. "You say you are Bishop, a Secret Service man: I say you are Aubrey—good Lord, Aubrey!—Stadenfeld, a notorious crook! Any answer to that, except your usual paralysing smile, which you'll be losing before you're much older?"

"My only answer is that you're mad and want restraining."

"And you fancy you're going to do the restraining? Open that door!"

He advanced, to look into the barrel of a revolver which Stadenfeld had produced with surprising quickness.

"Keep your distance, young man!" The thin squeak of the other's voice had now become a shrill treble. "Haven't I already told you what this place is?—an office of the British Secret Service. As an official of that organization, I am entitled to guard at any cost whatever—at any cost whatever," he repeated with a solemnity that even to the coldly infuriated Holiday was impressive—"any commission entrusted to me."

"You're a crook, not a Secret Service man!" repeated the visitor. "And if you shoot, you'll hang—don't forget that. Open that door! You have exactly five seconds."

Stadenfeld beamed.

"And what will happen if I refuse to obey?" he inquired.

"I have already told you," said Holiday, showing him a clenched fist.

"You fool, don't you realize I am armed—that if I wanted to, I could kill you six times over with this?" he described a

small arc with the revolver. "One of these bullets is liable to enter you in a very vulnerable part unless you hand over that article. Quickly now!"

With a totally unexpected agility, this grotesque caricature of a man skipped forward. He stopped a bare yard away from the man he was threatening.

"Do you hear!" he shrilled. "We have finished with pleasantries. This is serious. If you place the slightest value on your life, my friend, hand it over."

"I'll see you damned first," retorted Holiday. He knew he was near to death, but he kept his voice steady. To be scared by a ludicrous creature like this . . . it was unthinkable. Still, with peril so imminent, he must play for time.

"Convince me first that you are Bishop," he said.

"Haven't I told you a dozen times that I am Bishop?"

There was a crash. The door of a huge cupboard standing in the wall opposite the fireplace burst open. The body of a man bound hand and foot rolled out, and came to rest almost at Holiday's feet.

A corpse?

"Tell the swine he's a liar!" said a voice.

CHAPTER VI

THE BRIBE

To be a sports-player of international reputation means that a man must possess, amongst other qualities, the ability to take immediate advantage of a favourable situation. His faculties are trained that way.

The dramatic appearance of the bound figure came as a complete surprise to Holiday. But the same instinct which had served him on many playing-fields, came in useful now. He guessed that Stadenfeld would be as startled as himself, and he took advantage of this momentary confusion by leaping forward.

There was an explosion, but he could not have been hit by the bullet because he continued to feel perfectly fit, and he set about the job in hand with an eagerness to which his former anger acted as the finest stimulant. The man's protruding stomach was an obstacle, but he managed to land a blow on the fat crook's chin, and after that, the rest was easy. Stadenfeld looked just as unpleasant lying stretched out unconscious upon the floor as in ordinary life, but he was much safer.

By the time Holiday turned round, he found the man who had tumbled out of the cupboard busily engaged in freeing himself of his bonds.

"You might lend a hand here, old chap," the captive said in a pleasant voice.

"I don't know who you are, but I owe you a vote of thanks, anyway," he added a couple of minutes later. "Incidentally, you've been the means of putting to sleep one of the most dangerous crooks in London." He pointed to the still form of Stadenfeld.

Holiday grinned back.

"Thanks to you; if you hadn't made that startling appearance *via* the cupboard, I'd probably have been a most realistic imitation of a corpse myself by this time. By the way, you're the real Bishop, I take it? Don't say there are three of you!"

"Yes—I'm the real Bishop all right. That crook was merely impersonating me."

"So I imagined. My name is Holiday. That won't convey very much, but I've something here," he pulled it out of his overcoat pocket, "which I shall be very pleased to get rid of. It was given to me by a girl on the Riviera express a couple of nights ago. She asked me to deliver it to you at this address."

"Any further details?" asked the man.

"None—except that someone tried to get at the girl and murdered another woman in her place. A ghastly business. But no doubt you know all about it."

"Yes," agreed the other, "I know that." He went to a wall-safe, opened this and put the card-case inside.

"What made you believe me when I said I was the real Bishop just now?" he asked.

"The evidence was in your favour," he was told; "besides,

you looked as though you were speaking the truth."

"And that fellow didn't?"

"No. And by a curious coincidence, I happened to be warned against this particular specimen. That happened after dinner to-night in the Berkeley lounge."

Bishop, a slimly built, wiry-looking man of young middle-age, rocked on his heels.

"Would it be too indiscreet of me to ask the name of your informant?"

"Not at all. It was a friend of mine called Peter Traill. He's a Stock Exchange jobber. Don't ask me why he should have a nodding acquaintance with illustrious criminals, because I don't know. By the way, do you mind if I bag this beauty's revolver? It's a curious hobby, perhaps, but I am collecting things of that sort. 'Guns that might have killed me,' I am classifying them. Later on I may write a brochure about them, profusely illustrated." He picked up Stadenfeld's revolver and pocketed it.

"Guns?" The other lifted his rather bushy eye-brows. "Has there been another case, then?"

"Oh, yes. Two nights ago in the St. Joseph Hotel at Avignon. A fellow who looked like a second-class *maître d'hôtel* contrived to get in through the window. I woke up just in time to prevent him dispatching me to another world which may, or may not, be more agreeable than the present one. I'm beginning to think I shall meet my untimely end, after all, by being either poisoned or drowned."

"You interest me, Mr. Holiday. Who was this instrument of fate?"

"The same man who had committed the murder on the express, as near as I can judge. He wanted delivery of that card-case. He wanted it very badly. I refused, and we had a scrap. I flung him through the window hoping, of course, to break his neck, but he got away, apparently without any injury. He must have the devil's own luck. Which reminds me: friend Stadenfeld is about to begin to show signs of returning life. May I suggest he is not allowed to share the good fortune of his colleague at Avignon?"

"You need not worry about that; I'll telephone to some friends of mine in the police. In the meantime, however, I'll take an elementary precaution." Going to a drawer in a desk, he produced a pair of handcuffs. These he slipped on the wrists of Stadenfeld, who groaned at the indignity.

"You'll suffer for this, Bishop," he said.

"Not nearly so much as you will," was the easy retort.

"You know there's another one hanging about," Holiday reminded him; "a shifty-looking blighter dressed like a servant. He let me in."

"Wait here a minute and I'll see if he's still on the premises. I want a word with that joker myself. It was he who biffed me over the head when I didn't happen to be looking. In the delight of talking with you, I had rather forgotten him." With a smile, in which pleasant irony was a prominent feature, Bishop walked towards the door.

"Don't forget the handle's electrified," warned Holiday.

The other paused.

"I'll give you this credit, Stadenfeld," he said to the prisoner, "you know how to play your cards when you've got

them." The speaker turned to Holiday. "Thanks," he remarked.

The novitiate to so much mystery watched the owner of this strange room walk to the wall near the fireplace and press a button.

"So convenient, you see, in the event of an awkward customer coming in unexpectedly. Stadenfeld discovered it quicker than I should have imagined. The current is now switched off." To prove the truth of this, he walked to the door and turned the handle.

"Sure you will be all right alone for a few minutes?" he asked.

"Don't worry about me." Holiday felt himself liking this man. "Take this revolver."

"I've already got one, thanks," was the reply. "Shan't be long."

With the door closed, Holiday concentrated his attention on the prisoner. Stadenfeld, slumped in a chair, might have been an object of pity to some people, but he certainly wasn't to him. He remembered that this grossness had been the means—direct or indirect, it did not matter which—of the killing of an innocent girl, and his heart hardened. He had never taunted a beaten opponent before, but he could not resist the inclination to mortify this mountain of flesh.

"Not feeling quite so happy now, Stadenfeld, eh?" he inquired.

The man addressed looked at him fixedly with those cunning eyes.

"I want to talk to you," he said in a low tone—"I have a proposition to make."

"Nothing you could say would have the slightest effect on me, so I should advise you to save your breath."

"I'll give you a thousand pounds to take these damned things off." He held up his manacled wrists.

Holiday merely smiled.

"The only fact that would tempt me to set you free," he said, "would be to have the chance of knocking you senseless again. In the ordinary way, that wouldn't be a sporting thing to do, you having that pot belly, but in your case—well, I hope the warders at Dartmoor take as strong a dislike to you as I have, that's all."

He expected an explosion, but it did not come.

Instead, Aubrey Stadenfeld sighed.

"A month in prison would kill me," he said.

"That would seem a very satisfactory way of solving the situation," was the unmoved reply.

"A thousand pounds, I said."

"I heard you. Not for a million. Is that definite enough? If it isn't, let me add that I intend to give evidence against you at your trial. You'll be connected with the murder on the Riviera express."

Stadenfeld sighed again.

"I know nothing about any murder. I thought you were a sportsman, Mr. Holiday."

"I try to be," was the modest reply.

"And yet you agree to send a man in very indifferent health to his certain death."

"Tell that to the prison doctor."

"You refuse? For the last time, you refuse?"

"To hell with you—yes. When I think of that girl lying dead with a knife in her breast, I'm inclined to forestall the police and finish you myself."

Astonishingly enough, the man appeared undisturbed.

"You seem indifferent to bribes, my young friend, but have a little more patience. Although I had no concern in the unfortunate occurrence on that express, yet there are certain people who will regard my detention in one of His Majesty's detestable prisons as unfortunate—so unfortunate that they will be inclined, I feel sure, to adopt certain retaliatory methods against the hostage they have already secured. Need I tell you who that hostage is?"

"You swine!" cried Holiday. Already he understood; there was no need for the other to say anything more. The hostage his gang or organization had secured was the girl who had handed him the card-case. . . .

"I see you understand, Now, listen! Time is very short. Any minute Bishop may return. I have a bargain to make with you. If I am captured, that girl will die. Help me to escape, and I will arrange for her immediate release."

"How can I help you to escape? It is impossible." He wished to know more about the twisted working of the other's mind.

"All you have to do is to take off these damned handcuffs —the key is on that desk: I can see it."

"Even if you got rid of the things, you would still have to deal with me."

"That will be simple—if you are sensible. A blow on the forehead—not a heavy one, you understand—and you could easily feign unconsciousness. You could explain that I had made a sudden and unexpected leap at you . . . don't waste precious time, you fool; every second counts. If that girl's life is to be saved, you must do as I wish."

"Listen, Stadenfeld," was the answer; "I would rather rot in hell than lift a finger to save you."

Into the fat face leaped an expression of demoniac hate. The evil soul was exposed at last. The man looked as though he were possessed of a devil.

"By saying that, you have signed your own death-warrant as well as that of the girl!" he hissed.

Then the door opened and Bishop reappeared.

"Your friend was more lucky than you, Stadenfeld," he announced. "He got away."

Holiday stared at the crook. The latter must have extraordinary powers of self-control. The features which a moment before had been livid with hate and distorted by rage, were now composed. The man seemed almost indifferent.

"And now to settle you, Stadenfeld," went on Bishop. He went to the telephone and gave a number. Instantly he was connected.

"Is that you, Inspector? Bishop here. An old friend of yours dropped in on me to-night and he's waiting in my rooms for you to come along . . . yes, bring a plain-clothes man and a car; he's slippery. . . . What's his name? You've heard of Stadenfeld—little Aubrey? . . . Yes, I thought you

had," the ironic voice breaking into a chuckle. "No, I won't go until you turn up. 'Bye." The receiver was hung up and Bishop faced the prisoner.

"If you have any confessions—I'm sure they'd be interesting—now's the time to come across with them," he said. "No?" as Stadenfeld kept silent. "Well, I scarcely expected you'd talk. It ought to be at least seven years—and on the Moor, too—so I'll be saying good-bye."

Even this did not provoke the other into a retort. To Holiday, after seeing Stadenfeld in that maniacal rage, this silence was sinister. This man had a dignity which was impressive. Instead of a crumbling ruin, he took on the character of a strong man prepared to meet fate—to meet it, and defeat it. The victory which Bishop and he had managed to secure suddenly lost a good deal of its lustre.

Ten minutes passed before there was a knock on the door. Opening it, Bishop admitted two men. Although they were in plain clothes, they had "police officers" stamped upon them. The eyes of the foremost brightened as he saw the prisoner.

"Little Aubrey, eh!" he said. "Well, I *am* glad to see you. What's the charge, Mr. Bishop? Not that that matters—we have a very choice assortment already waiting. . . . Little Aubrey—well, well, well!"

The speaker's companion touched the prisoner on the shoulder, and the fat man rose. Holiday found himself reluctantly admiring him for his self-control. Then his mood changed. Stadenfeld, as he passed, gave him such a look of concentrated venom that he involuntarily recoiled.

"Exit the villain," said Bishop when the door had closed. "In a hurry, Holiday?"

"Not particularly. If you don't mind, I should like to stay long enough to ask you one or two questions."

"By all means—I'll tell you anything I can. But I don't see any reason why we shouldn't make ourselves comfortable—especially after the recent disturbance."

Within a very short space of time, the room had taken on another appearance. Instead of an office, it now looked more like a sitting-room. From a wall-cupboard Bishop produced a bottle of whisky, a syphon of soda-water, and a box of cigars. Two stiff drinks mixed, he handed the cigars to Holiday, who was comfortably ensconced in a worn leather chair.

"Thanks, I prefer a pipe," remarked the visitor; "but, my hat! this drink tastes good. I don't mind telling you. I wanted it. Murder and sudden death aren't much in my line."

Bishop grinned—and in doing so looked more than ever like a grown-up mischievous schoolboy.

"You've earned it, anyway," he conceded. "And as regards the murder and sudden death part, you haven't done so badly for a start. Let's have your glass."

With his legs stretched out luxuriously, Holiday found it difficult to credit the recent happenings. From a jungle in which a wild beast had preyed, the room had changed into the orthodox abode of a comfort-loving bachelor. Bishop, his host, was entirely conventional-looking, if one excepted the man's eyes. These gave the lie to their owner belonging to the ordinary, humdrum class. Yet, at the same time, he knew that a stranger entering could have formed only one impres-

sion—that of two typical Englishmen having met for a friendly chat.

This illusion was quickly shattered. Bishop, after taking a sip from his glass, looked across at the pipe-smoker with a half-smile upon his hard, but well-shaped mouth.

"You're probably aware of the fact by now," he said, "but if not, let me tell you, Holiday, that you've been blown into a quite nasty business. If it won't give you too much fag, do you mind telling me exactly what happened on the Monte Carlo train?"

When he started the narrative, Holiday was pulling easily at his pipe. Soon, however, his feelings made him lay the briar aside. He was moved to a greater extent than he realized, and Bishop watched his face with discerning eyes.

"And now," said Holiday, when he had come to an end, "I want to ask you the first question—you needn't answer any of the others if you don't feel like it."

Bishop's face underwent a slight change.

"What's the question?" he inquired.

"Where can I see that girl again?"

The reply was not encouraging.

"If you're anxious that she should know you did the job all right, I can pass on that information myself."

"I dare say—but that scarcely fits the bill." Holiday's tone had a steely quality. "I should like to see her myself, if it's all the same to you. I think I am entitled to that much."

There was a challenge in his voice which the other did not accept.

"I should jolly well say so," acquiesced Bishop; "perhaps something might be arranged."

The reply did not particularly please the listener. Holiday was inclined to glower. He realized he was treading on delicate ground; the girl might be something closer than a mere colleague to Bishop: it was possible that she was his fiancée, or even his wife—but he was prepared to risk that. The truth was—and every moment forced it home with ever-increasing force—he simply *had* to see the girl again. Was he in love with her? He scarcely knew. As a matter of fact, his thoughts were so confused that he was not able to sort them out with any degree of clearness. One fact sufficed, however: that until he saw this girl again, he would know no peace. He did not want any conventional thanks for the little he had done; what he did want was to have personal knowledge that she was safe and unharmed.

It was the fear which this thought conjured up that made him now address his companion sharply.

"I am going to be very personal," he warned him. "Is this girl married?"

Bishop flashed him a provocative smile.

"Not that I am aware of," he said.

"Engaged?"

"If you knew her better, you would realize that Miss—her name does not matter—is not the type to think of men in that connection. She is far too keen on her present job."

"I warned you I was going to be beastly personal," replied Holiday: "Does this job mean that she is constantly running the risk of being murdered?"

Bishop frowned at the tip of his cigar.

"I wouldn't put the risk quite so high as that—but all the same . . ." He broke off, to add somewhat irritably: "My dear fellow, I really cannot go on discussing the subject with you—try to understand that."

Holiday's irritation matched his own.

"Why not?" he demanded. "I have the advantage of you, Bishop; I saw that poor woman stretched out cold and stiff, with a knife buried in her breast. . . . But for the most wonderful fluke, the girl whose name you refuse to tell me would have been killed by that same knife. That is what I cannot forget."

Bishop did not reply. He evidently was not prepared to continue the subject. The expression on his face said plainly that his companion had transgressed in going so far. Whilst the two smoked in strained silence, the telephone rang in staccato fashion.

"Excuse me," remarked Bishop abruptly.

"Of course."

Bishop was only at the instrument for a minute or so, but when he returned to his seat, Holiday could see that he was perturbed.

"I thought we were lucky—but we aren't," he said without any preamble. "That was Scotland Yard speaking. Stadenfeld's escaped."

Holiday, who was about to relight his pipe, allowed the match to burn unheeded.

"Escaped!" The tone was so angry that the speaker might have had a personal grudge against his companion.

This was understandable—at least to himself. The fact that Stadenfeld was free once more, meant that the girl's life was again in awful jeopardy. Then the memory of the threat that Stadenfeld had made, caused him to lean forward and seize Bishop's arm.

"I've got to tell you this," he said earnestly. "Whilst you were out of the room half an hour ago, Stadenfeld offered me a thousand pounds to give him a chance to get away. Of course, I told him to go to hell, but—are you sure the girl we have been speaking of is quite safe at the present time?" he demanded.

"So far as I know, she is perfectly safe."

"So far as you know! Damn it, man, are you *sure?*"

"One can never be sure of anything in this game," replied Bishop broodingly. "In any case, why this sudden panic?"

"I'll tell you why: Stadenfeld swore to me that his people had secured the girl and that they were holding her as a hostage. He swore, also, that if he were sent to prison, she would suffer for it. They would kill her."

The news evidently upset the listener.

"That was merely bluff," he replied, after a pause. "I don't believe a word of it. In any case——" the speaker's teeth bit deeper into the butt of his cigar as he paced up and down the floor.

Then came another interruption.

From somewhere down below a bell rang sharply.

CHAPTER VII

HOLIDAY LOSES HIS TEMPER

"You'll have to excuse me again, I am afraid," remarked Bishop.

Holiday nodded. He had started by liking the other, but he hated the confounded mystery with which he surrounded himself. Also, why did he allow a girl to run such appalling risks? To send a girl out on a job which led her into danger of her life was a beastly thing—if there was work of that description, and it simply had to be done, why didn't he do it himself? If that ring had not come, he would have told him so.

Apart from his anger, Holiday had another uncomfortable impression. He had the feeling that he was outstaying his welcome. He ought to have gone long before, he supposed. Once having done his job, he should have retired into the oblivion from whence he came.

But he did not feel like retiring into oblivion. He could be an obstinate cuss on occasion, and the information which this man Bishop had so reluctantly given him was not at all satisfactory. The thought of that girl worried him tremendously. It was true that the merest chance had thrown them together, but—well, if Bishop, who should have taken on the job, could not adequately protect her, he was not going

to stand aside without having a shot at the thing himself. That knife . . .

The door opened and Bishop entered, followed by another man. Holiday stared when he saw who this was.

"Traill!" he ejaculated.

The Stock Exchange jobber looked at Bishop and then smiled.

"I've already warned you, Traill, that Mr. Holiday is of a very inquisitive turn of mind," remarked his companion.

Traill closed the door and drew up a chair near Holiday.

"There are certain things connected with this affair," he told the latter, "that Bishop and I simply must keep to ourselves."

"Bishop and you," repeated Holiday. He was becoming more mystified every minute. "What the deuce are you doing in this galley?"

The Stock Exchange man lit a cigarette.

"As you have come in so usefully, Holiday, I'll go as far as I can with you," he said. "As you may already have guessed, friend Bish. here works for the Secret Service, and I put in a bit of time at the same job myself."

Holiday stared afresh.

"What about the Stock Exchange?"

The man he thought he had known intimately for a good many years dismissed the pertinent question with a slight wave of the hand.

"Oh, that's nothing but a blind," he remarked. "Most of us have an alibi of some sort. Bishop, here, is actually a partner in a man's outfitters in the West End." Whilst Holiday

was digesting this surprising information, the speaker turned to Bishop. It was as though his mind had turned off at a tangent. "This is rotten news about Stadenfeld getting away. How did it happen?"

Bishop frowned.

"From what they told me at the Yard, there was a collision in Russell Square, a powerful touring-car smashing clean into the taxi in which Inspector Durrant and his assistant were taking Stadenfeld to Cannon Row. Not only the driver, but both police officers, were badly injured. The inevitable crowd soon gathered, and after the excitement had died down a bit it was discovered that by some extraordinary means Stadenfeld had disappeared."

"A put-up job," commented Traill; "some of his gang were in the tourer, of course, and in the confusion it must have been a comparatively simple matter to get little Aubrey away. A neat bit of work, if you ask me—but it will set hell popping in certain quarters."

Holiday coughed.

"Up till now," he remarked, "I have not been exactly overwhelmed by pressure on the part of Mr. Bishop to take any further hand in this business, but," looking straight at Traill, "I'm going to risk a snub and ask you, Peter, if there's any chance of my doing so? I've got rather a personal interest, you see—that swine Stadenfeld went out of his way to be particularly offensive to me just before the police came."

Before Traill could make any reply, Bishop interposed.

"The particular cause of Mr. Holiday's anxiety is the wish he has to ensure the future welfare——"

"Safety!" snapped Holiday.

"Safety, then, of a young lady whom I have already assured him must remain nameless. Isn't that right, Traill?"

"Absolutely right." He turned to Holiday. "I am sorry not to be able to satisfy what, in the circumstances, you consider, no doubt, is a legitimate curiosity. I can quite understand that. But, old man," Traill went on in a very serious tone, "believe me when I say it will be much better for you to keep out of this. It's too risky for the ordinary person."

Holiday's anger increased. He felt that he was being treated like a child. He didn't want Traill's aggravating consideration. "You forget that I am already in it," he replied.

Traill smiled at him.

"For what you have done, Bishop and I are exceedingly grateful," he said. "I want you to believe that. But the fact remains that so long as you continue to be mixed up in this affair, so long will you stand a very healthy chance of slipping into the next world by the quickest possible route. Don't think that I am exaggerating: that is the truth. And, as an old friend, Jerry, I am not prepared to have that on my conscience. That's the final word, I am afraid."

"The devil take you and your conscience!" exploded Holiday. Baffled and enraged, he realized it was no use continuing this one-sided argument. He would have to get away before he completely lost his temper.

"All right—I'll clear off and leave you to it." He could not resist a Parthian shot of anger, however. "I suggest that you take a little more care of that case than you appear to have done with certain other things. Good night, Bishop."

The man with the whimsical eyes stepped forward and held out his hand. So far from being annoyed, he was actually smiling.

"Good night, Holiday; I shan't forget the good turn you've done me." Holiday gave the hand a brief pressure and then turned away. He could not help liking this fellow—and yet, on the other hand, he could have punched his head with the greatest of pleasure. . . . It had been an exasperating evening.

Before he could open the door, Peter Traill had placed a hand on his arm.

"Try to see it in the proper light, old man, however difficult that may appear to you." He paused for a moment. "You're a fellow to whom life means a lot—in fact, you've got about everything that's worth living for—and there's no earthly sense in you running the risk of being snuffed out at an early date. If I may say so without offence, you're an amateur at this sort of game—and the present job is purely a professional one. It all comes in the day's work to Bishop and me, but," with a smile that robbed the words of much of their stolid truth, "what I want you to do now is to go straight home and forget everything that has happened."

"If you mean that you expect me to keep my mouth shut, you need not have any fear on that account," was the reply. He shook hands with Traill and left the room.

Five minutes' walk brought him to Russell Square. Here he engaged a taxi, and shortly afterwards was letting himself into his rooms in Mount Street.

A man who bore the unmistakable stamp of an ex-soldier

—Sam Somers had served throughout the war in the 17th Lancers—showed himself quickly.

"There's a telegram for you, sir," he announced.

Holiday took the buff envelope from the tray and tore it open indifferently.

The next moment, however, he became rigid.

This is what he read:

I hope to have the pleasure of meeting you again.

STADENFELD.

CHAPTER VIII

THE GIRL WHO DARED

Back in the Taviton Street flat the two Secret Service men were talking earnestly. The whimsicality had gone from Bishop's eyes, and there was now no trace of a smile on Traill's face.

"So Stadenfeld's in this," remarked Traill; "I had an idea he was mixed up with it. How did he get in here to-night?"

Bishop smiled deprecatingly.

"Somebody must have made several visits whilst I was out and got a good impression of the flat-door lock," he replied; "there's no doubt that a skeleton key of some sort was used. They are cunning devils—to-night's proved that, if we hadn't known it before. I got back from dinner about nine o'clock and went into the bedroom to change my coat. I hadn't a suspicion that anything was wrong, but there is no doubt Stadenfeld and the man with him—a fellow I was not able to place, by the way—followed me into the house. By some uncanny means, which I am not going to attempt to explain, Stadenfeld must have known my habit of going straight into my bedroom and changing into a house-coat before settling down for the evening. Anyway, when I stepped blithely in here a few minutes afterwards, I was for it. There was Stadenfeld, his stomach apparently filling the room, holding me up

with a gun, and with that loathsome smile of his fairly splitting his face in half. Of course, I was startled for the moment, and whilst I had my hands up, the other fellow—a mean-looking little rat—crept behind me and biffed me over the head with what I should think was a loaded stick. I must have faded out, because I do not remember anything else until I came to, feeling like lingering death. It took me quite a while to realize what had actually happened, but I had sense enough to keep quiet whilst trying to pierce the fog, and so when I tumbled out from that cupboard, the denouement was so startling that Stadenfeld was momentarily put off his guard. That enabled your pal Holiday to do some pretty useful work with his maulers. Do you know, Traill, I quite like that chap."

Peter nodded.

"I like him so much myself," he said, "that I'm going to keep him out of this by hook or by crook. He's too good a bloke to be sacrificed to the swine we are after. But, I say, this will mean that you will have to give up this flat."

"I'm afraid it will," agreed Bishop. "You know the reason I selected the place?"

"Because, from the crook element point of view, this is one of the most interesting streets in London, and you thought you could keep an eye on a good many interesting people. Yes, I know that. But of course after to-night it will be a marked place. By the way, hadn't I better take that thing Holiday brought?"

For reply, Bishop went to the wall-safe.

"You had," he acquiesced, and handed it over.

"What about yourself?"

Bishop laughed.

"Oh, I'm going to stay on. For to-night, at any rate. Who knows, there may be another visitor—but this time," grimly, "I'll be ready for him. Coming back to Holiday for a moment —what actually is he?"

"Apart from being quite preposterously well-off, he's one of the best-known polo-players in the world, and an all-round good sportsman. Half American, half British, and combining the best of both sides. Beyond that—and the fact that he's not keen on women—I don't know very much about him, although we've been friends of a sort for the last six years. He travels a lot."

"Funny Valerie should have picked on him."

"Yes—in a way," came the agreement; "but if a girl was in a hole—and there's no doubt she was at the time—Holiday is just the type she would feel inclined to trust on sight. Don't you think so?"

"Yes. By the way, have you heard from her?"

"Not a word." Traill sat up, alert. "Any particular reason for asking?"

"Only this. Stadenfeld was bragging to-night that his crowd had got hold of Valerie Insall and were keeping her hostage in case of need. All bluff, I expect."

"Good God! But suppose it isn't? I'll kill that swine myself. Look here, if any message does come through, I'll let you know."

"Right—and look out for that case on the way home; it's sure to be something valuable."

"Why you have been able to restrain yourself from looking, I don't know," declared the other.

Bishop struck an attitude.

"I stopped myself as an act of penance. After to-night, I feel my right place is really in a hosier's shop. I'm not worth a policeman's job on point-duty, let alone a place in L2. Incidentally, I may add, I haven't had time." Something of the old whimsicality showed in his smile.

"Well, you're absolved from all blame—I'll see to that," replied his brother officer in the Intelligence Department of the Home Secret Service to which they both belonged. Traill saw that the packet to which so much value was attached was secure in an inner pocket of his coat, and prepared to leave.

"Take care of yourself," were his parting words.

Bishop put a hand into a drawer of his desk and produced a revolver.

"I only hope someone *does* come . . ." he said musingly.

Half an hour later Peter Traill unlocked the door of his own flat. He lived in that picturesque and romantic portion of the West Central district known as the Adelphi. This by-path off the Strand remains one of the most pleasant places in which a bachelor can pitch his tent in the whole of London. Famous dramatists, world-renowned poets, eminent novelists, sages with European reputations, are amongst its dwellers, making the Adelphi a distinctive London landmark. The fact that they have as their near neighbours some of the most polished scoundrels in crookdom does nothing to alienate their affection for this charming backwater. Traill

himself occupied the rooms which had once housed a notorious Satanist—a man of such diabolic mind and practice that continued complaints had finally compelled the authorities to send him out of the country.

If this tainted person had left any unpleasant atmosphere behind him in the handsomely panelled rooms, Peter Traill was not aware of its influence. He was perfectly happy at Number 44, York Buildings, Adelphi, W.C. 2. He considered, and there was a certain amount of justification in the boast, that he had the most comfortable quarters of anyone of his acquaintance.

The travelling-clock upon the mahogany mantelpiece showed five minutes to midnight as he sank into a capacious saddle-bag chair in front of a cheery-looking fire. The card-case he had taken from his pocket was resting on a small table, awaiting attention only whilst he filled a pipe. With the tobacco well alight, he concentrated on its contents. As he read the various documents written on thin paper in a small neat script which yet showed a great deal of character, and as he glanced from time to time at the three small photographs which accompanied the papers, he muttered to himself various expressions of admiration.

He had scarcely come to an end when there was a ring at the door. He waited—to hear three other rings sound in quick succession.

Reassured, he rose. Precaution, however, made him first of all gather up the papers and photographs and place them in a table-drawer, which he locked with a key hanging from a bunch he carried in his trousers-pocket.

Even then—so much was there at stake—he slipped a small revolver into his coat-pocket before leaving the room.

But one glance at his visitor made him exclaim joyously.

"Valerie!" he said. "Good Lord, how glad I am to see you!"

The girl quickly stepped inside. It was not until the door was closed behind her that she spoke.

"Peter, have you got the case?" Her voice was tense with eagerness. "I had to take a great chance——"

Traill gave her a reassuring pat on the shoulder.

"Don't worry," he told her; "I brought it away from Bishop's rooms not an hour ago."

The change which came over her face was wonderful.

"Then Mr. Holiday got it through?" she said, clasping her hands.

"Yes—at the risk of his life, I understand. The same man who did the murder on the Riviera express, had a desperate scrap with him in his hotel room at Avignon the same night. But Holiday got the better of it—he's a very useful man in a scrap—and so everything's O.K. By the way, it was rather remarkable that you should hit upon a friend of mine."

The girl lifted her eyes to his.

"Is Gerald Holiday a friend of yours, Peter?"

"I've known him for the last six years," was the reply, "What made you select him? But what a hound I am," Traill added sharply, "to keep you standing here. If you don't mind the conventions"—he smiled at the word—"come into the parlour. Had supper?"

"Yes. Oh, this is restful," she said thankfully, at the sight of the comfortable room.

Having placed her in his own chair—the capacity of which emphasized her slender grace—he looked at the visitor with an intensity in which personal admiration and a kind of reverential awe were about equally blended. Valerie Insall, although as yet he knew no details, had successfully tackled a job single-handed which might have baffled the ablest man in the Service.

Her appearance was all against that of an adventuress. Beauty she had, but it was a beauty typical of the English country-side—soft, gracious, appealing. Her hair, now that she had taken off her hat, was shown to be fair, and inclined to curl; her complexion had the gentle glow of a rose blooming in a Sussex garden; her mouth was tender—and the grey eyes held no betrayal of the horrors through which she had recently passed. There was not a single hint of any exotic quality in her. That was why, in Peter Traill's opinion—and Peter loved her, although he knew he had no earthly chance: as Bishop had told Gerald Holiday earlier in the evening, Valerie Insall did not seem to regard men in that light—she was so wonderful.

She was far too feminine to be doing the work which she persisted in undertaking. This was man's work; but when he had pointed this fact out to her, she had merely smiled. "You mustn't think that I am entirely useless, Peter," she said.

After that there was no further argument: she dismissed

the subject, and out of respect for her wishes, he had had to follow her lead.

Now he looked at her so intently that she smiled.

"I might be a ghost, Peter," she remarked; "don't look at me as though I had come back from the dead."

"I daren't allow myself to think about it—but why will you continue to run such risks, Valerie?"

"Because I have to, stupid," she replied, with a toss of the head he knew so well; "what do you think of my spoils?"

He answered her gravely.

"They're splendid, old girl. How on earth did you get hold of the stuff?"

She leaned farther back in the big chair, crossing her slim legs which looked so shapely in their silk stockings.

"I got it at the Villa Sadko at Beauvallon."

"Beauvallon? South of France?"

"Yes: it's new—and yet another of the earthly Paradises where only man is vile. At the Villa Sadko lives the Prince Kuropatin. He's a Russian—or was; now he's anything that will bring him money. It took some time to get the information I wanted."

She paused, and something of the anxiety he was feeling came out in his speech.

"You have been away two months." It might have been two years by the way he spoke.

She nodded.

"Eight weeks—the eight shortest weeks in my life." She paused a moment and then continued: "I went to Paris first;

then on to Marseilles; after that to St. Raphael. At each place I picked up threads. Joining them together, I descended on the Villa Sadko at Beauvallon. Here I presented myself to his former Royal Highness, the Prince Kuropatin."

"In what capacity?" inquired her listener, leaning towards her. Traill was held by the simple magic of her story.

"I was a young Englishwoman stranded on the Riviera. I had been a school-teacher in London, but, wearying of the life, had scraped together my few savings and had descended on Monte Carlo—with the inevitable result, of course. I made the story sound as realistic as possible, bringing in three gulps and one promise of threatened tears. After a while the Prince engaged me as governess to his only daughter—a pest of a child."

"My dear!" ejaculated Traill.

"The information I had already collected proved wonderfully accurate," the girl continued, as though she had not heard the interruption; "I found that the villa was the meeting-place for"—she stopped to look at Traill significantly—"quite a number of interesting people. The Prince was merely a figure-head. The meetings took place at night—and on an average once a week—and I had to be careful, because, for greater security, they were not held in the house, but in a chalet in the garden which was most strictly guarded. The grounds themselves were always patrolled."

"Valerie, you are very wonderful," came from the listener.

She shook her head in denial of the praise.

"No, Peter, I'm not, but I'm very determined; and my ex-

perience is that a person who's sufficiently determined can contrive to do most things. Of course, I took certain risks——"

"They must have been appalling! What would you have said if they had caught you?"

"They didn't," she said, surveying the snake-skin shoes she wore; "but quite a number of people have been known to suffer from somnambulism."

"That crowd wouldn't have believed it." Traill, reaching across, put his hand on her shoulder. "You must finish with this life, Valerie; it isn't fair to you. At least, let me tell the Chief."

"That would mean breaking your promise to me, Peter," she reminded him. "You wouldn't do that?"

He groaned.

"In your own interests, my dear, you ought to release me from that promise."

"I cannot—yet," was the reply. "Don't look so worried, old boy; the end may come sooner than we had hoped. What I got at Beauvallon will surely help. From what I could gather before I was forced to slip away at three o'clock one morning"—this astonishing girl actually smiled at the memory—"the centre of operations has now switched to London. At least, some of the biggest men are here. So you needn't worry about me any more, Peter."

There was a look of hope on his face as he asked quickly: "Does that mean that you are going to leave the rest to Bishop and me?"

But his new-found relief was quickly dispelled.

"I must still carry on," she said; "and now tell me about Mr. Holiday. Nothing happened to him, I hope?"

"On the contrary, quite a lot has happened to him." Traill smiled at his thoughts, and then broke off to add: "Stadenfeld is in this thing—did you know?"

She shook her head.

"Stadenfeld," she repeated; "who is Stadenfeld? Oh, that's the name of the man who should have reported to one of the Conferences at Beauvallon, but didn't. I remember now. Tell me about him."

"Stadenfeld is the most powerful of all the kings of the London underworld," Traill replied gravely; "he is one of those men who has been able, until to-night, to walk serenely about the West End because, although the police and ourselves knew that he had committed practically every crime in the list, sufficient evidence had never been brought home to him. So he went his way smiling, realizing very well that we cursed every time we saw him."

Valerie Insall examined the stitches in her gauntlet gloves.

"He is just the type who would be in this thing," she remarked; "the most dangerous men in the world—no one else would suit them."

"We had Stadenfeld to-night."

"You've captured him?" Her eyes were bright with excitement.

"We did—but then the police let him go. No, that's not quite fair." As briefly as possible, he narrated the drama that had been enacted in Bishop's Taviton Street flat. "Staden-

feld's escape sounds like something out of a Chicago newspaper," he concluded; "but the fact remains that he got clear away and that he is likely to cause a tremendous amount of trouble in the future. He tried to bluff us that you had been taken prisoner."

"I nearly was. They have an Italian called Benelli, who tracked me to Marseilles and then got on the same train—the express."

"And killed another girl in mistake for you. Valerie, you *must* give it up."

But even then she would not agree.

"It was terrible, reading about that murder. There's no doubt Benelli made the mistake you say. That poor girl shared my sleeping-compartment, but, after handing the case to Mr. Holiday, I managed to leave the train without being seen, and spent the night in a village five miles from Avignon. Now I come to think of it, it was a cowardly thing to do, because Benelli must have guessed that I had handed the papers to Mr. Holiday."

"He did—but Holiday, who, as I have already said, happens to be a friend of mine, didn't mind. In fact, he's frightfully keen on carrying on, especially after what happened tonight in Bishop's flat."

The girl started.

"But he mustn't," she said impulsively. "I must see him and explain—explain and apologize. I was foolish enough to lose my nerve on the train; you know, Peter," she continued, rising and putting a gloved hand on his arm, "so much was at stake that I became desperate. It wasn't so much the actual

danger to myself that I feared; it was the terror of losing the information which I had risked so much to obtain. Say you understand."

"Of course," he reassured her; "and so far as Holiday is concerned, you can be convinced right away that he was only too glad to do what he could. If you could have heard him to-night, you would have been completely satisfied about that. My difficulty was to try to restrain him. In fact, I had to take the chance of losing his friendship, so determined was he to continue, whilst I was equally determined that he shouldn't."

"No, he mustn't," the girl agreed; "the risk is too great. Do you think he will understand when it is explained to him?"

"The difficulty will be to keep him out of it—especially if he sees you, Valerie."

There was a hint of sadness in the speaker's voice, but the girl's cheeks flushed.

"Then I must not see him," she replied.

CHAPTER IX

HOLIDAY LEAVES HIS BREAKFAST

At the moment Valerie Insall uttered these words, a man with a stomach so pronounced as to be an offence to the eye was being driven at a rapid pace in the direction of Dorking. Aubrey Stadenfeld, having escaped from the police, was proceeding to the house of the man he served with the intelligence which made him a master-crook.

The room into which he was ushered was furnished with taste and luxury. From behind a handsome walnut writing-table, a man rose to greet him.

"This is unexpected, Stadenfeld," he said, and his tone was chilly; "do you realize that you might have been followed here?"

"I realize that I had to get out of London to-night," was the answer; "don't worry—no blasted policeman knows which direction I took. In any case, I had to see you personally; there is a good deal I have to tell you."

After the visitor had made his report, the other tapped with a pencil upon the gleaming wood of the writing-table.

"This man Holiday threatens to be awkward," he summed up. "I think we shall have to deal with him."

"Leave it to me," said Stadenfeld, with a smile that threatened to split his face in half.

Gerald Holiday found this night passing very slowly. In spite of a double-whisky which he had taken the last thing, he could not sleep. He knew what the trouble was—there were too many thoughts surging through his mind. However determinedly he endeavoured to banish them, they still persisted. The result was that at six o'clock he rose disgruntled, took a bath, got into a suit of old tweeds, and a quarter of an hour later was walking at a good four-miles-an-hour gait through Hyde Park. He wanted action, and exercise was the only outlet.

After an hour had passed, he became more mentally rested. With a tiredness of the muscles came a corresponding lull in the riot of his thoughts. As he turned out of the Marble Arch entrance, he had an idea; he would drop in on Peter Traill for breakfast. After telephoning to his man, Somers, to acquaint him of the decision, he continued his walk down Oxford and Regent Streets, across the Circus, down the Haymarket into Trafalgar Square, and from thence into the quietude of the Adelphi.

It was some time before Traill answered the door, and when Peter saw who his visitor was, he evidenced signs of confusion which were puzzling to Holiday. The latter affected not to notice anything, however, and walked into the flat.

"I've come for breakfast," he announced.

"The deuce you have!" Traill's manner became increasingly peculiar; his attitude was the reverse of cordial, to say the least.

"What's the matter with you, man?" demanded the visi-

tor. "I don't expect you to say you're glad to see me, but you might make an effort not to look as though I were the World's Worst Pest."

"The fact is——" started Traill. But the other would not allow him to continue.

"If you're short of grub, we'll go along to the Savoy."

"I've plenty of grub."

"Well, hurry up and cook some of it; you're always bragging about your culinary efforts—how you prefer meals which you've got yourself, and so on. Let's have some evidence!"

"Hang you, Holiday!" said the other.

There seemed so much covert hostility in the tone that the caller stared.

"Is there anything really the matter?"

Traill laughed at this.

"What should be the matter, you ass?" he replied. "Can't a chap be a bit off colour first thing in the morning?" Although it was evident that the other was making an effort to be pleasant, Holiday was not satisfied. That first-thing-in-the-morning excuse was so much bluff. When in London, he had often dropped in at the Adelphi for a bite of breakfast, and these visits had generally been unexpected. He had a strong inclination now to walk down the steps again, but resisted the feeling. He found he valued Peter Traill's friendship too highly to allow what must be merely a temporary fit of bad temper to influence him.

"Cheer up, you old devil!" he remarked. "I won't ask what you've got on your mind—another of those horrible secrets,

I suppose. But throw it off and hustle some breakfast; or shall we go along to the Savoy? It's for you to say."

"We'll stay here," Traill replied after a pause.

Pretending not to notice the other's preoccupation, Holiday settled himself in the sitting-room with the morning paper, which had arrived during his talk with Traill, and waited whilst his host disappeared in the direction of the kitchen. He was at a complete loss to understand Traill's ungraciousness, but he decided to ignore the matter. If it had been any other man of his acquaintance . . . but he continued to feel that he rated Peter's friendship too highly to risk an open rupture.

The breakfast arrived in due course, and Holiday, whose walk had made him extremely hungry, fell to with relish. As he helped himself to a second kidney, he smiled across at his host.

"Any former derogatory remarks concerning your cooking are herewith withdrawn," he announced.

Traill smiled at the compliment, but it remained very clear, nevertheless, that he was still not at his ease. Anxious to get the atmosphere cleared, his companion started a new line of talk.

"It's about last night that I came to have a yarn with you," he stated.

Traill picked up the coffee-pot, seemed about to pour himself a second cup of very excellent coffee, and then replaced the pot on its stand.

"I am afraid I cannot discuss that, old chap," he replied; "you remember what Bishop and I said."

Then, at last, Holiday's patience gave. He laid down his knife and fork, looked at his old friend and asked one question: "Are you perfectly serious, Peter?"

Trail did not appear happy, but his tone was resolute as he said: "I am afraid I am, Jerry." Was it merely his imagination, Holiday asked himself, or did he actually give a quick look backwards as he spoke?

"All right—I'm sorry to have inflicted my company upon you." Holiday rose and made straight for the door.

"Don't be a fool," said Traill. The latter, still looking uncomfortable, remained seated, however; he made no attempt to restrain his caller from carrying out his obvious intention.

Holiday reached the door, opened it, put on his coat and hat in the hall, picked up his stick, and said his farewell.

Then Traill made a belated remonstrance.

"You're not really going?" he asked.

"Of course, I'm going. I'm tired of——"

The rest of the sentence remained unfinished. Holiday, looking past Traill's shoulder, saw the face of a girl. It had showed itself round a bedroom door, and he recognized it at once.

No wonder Traill wished to get rid of him! This was the girl of the Riviera express—the girl for whom—not that that mattered a damn, of course—he had cheerfully risked his life.

And she was in Traill's flat—had probably spent the night there. . . .

The next second, the face had disappeared; the owner was

as determined apparently not to face him as Traill was to prevent him meeting her.

Rage blazed up in his heart; bitter words leapt to the tongue. Because he was afraid he would say too much, he turned away, and, furious with himself and the world, walked rapidly down the stone steps leading to the street.

The blackest mood he had ever known gripped him mercilessly. He walked blindly on, not caring, and scarcely knowing where he went. The Strand was resuming its usual maelstrom character by the time he reached it, and twice, if a considerate hand had not reached out, he might have been knocked down by a rampageous motor-bus. In each instance he passed on without a word of thanks—he, the most courteous and affable of men in the ordinary way.

Eventually he found himself on a seat opposite the lake in St. James's Park. How he had got there he did not know. All he realized was that he was sick of everything connected with life.

So that girl was nothing but a hussy—and he had fallen for her himself! This was the most humiliating of all the humiliating experiences he had had since returning to London—the fact that he had been crazy enough to fall in love with a woman—who was another man's mistress!

Traill's extraordinary reticence could be understood now of course. The morning caller had been very much *de trop* —naturally! But why hadn't the man been direct and told him that he would prefer to go along to the Savoy? That would have left the coast clear for the girl.

Yet, he reflected, as he traced a pattern in the ground with the ferrule of his stick, perhaps his visit to the Adelphi had been prophetic—as had the loss of sleep the night before. Fate had evidently decided that he was not to take any further part in this affair, the initial memory of which was now nauseating. He was well out of it—let Traill keep his paramour: he was as welcome to her as to his slimy trade.

Somers, his servant, was surprised to see the frown on his master's face when Holiday returned to Mount Street, but he was still more surprised to be asked how he would like a trip abroad.

"I should like it very much, sir," he said, when he had recovered his breath.

"Very well—I'm tired of London. Make your own choice and then see about the tickets."

"But——"

"Don't raise any fool objections, man; you heard what I said: make your choice and then see about the tickets."

"Yes, sir—certainly, sir——" What Somers would have continued to babble if the telephone had not rung, he himself would have been at a loss to conjecture. As it was, he hurried away, consternation clearly depicted on his face.

He returned within a minute.

"Mr. Farquhar on the phone, sir."

Farquhar. That was his solicitor. What could he want?

He was soon to know.

"Is that you, Holiday?" asked a voice; "this is Farquhar. I am sorry to have to tell you that your Aunt Margaret, Miss

Tweedale, died last night in her sleep. As you are her executor, I should be glad if you could manage to give me a call some time to-day."

"I thought of going abroad."

"But you've only just got back."

"I know—oh, all right. I'll come. Sorry to hear the news, of course."

As he turned away from the instrument, the thought came that perhaps fate had changed its mind. Anyway, it would be impossible for him to leave London now for a few days.

CHAPTER X

THE WOMAN IN GREY

HOLIDAY frowned as he turned away from the telephone.

Destiny seemed determined to play shuttlecock with his affairs. First, it promised to set him free of the most embarrassing business he had ever known, and then, practically in the same instant, it changed its mind, and, laughing up its sleeve, pitch-forked him back into a fresh bewilderment.

This unexpected death of his mother's sister kept him busy during the next few days. Farquhar, the solicitor, was a hard task-master; and, with a complete disregard of the convenience of his important client, he kept Holiday's nose to the grindstone.

"And you can't say you're not being well paid for it," he commented grimly, "seeing that you come into the bulk of the money."

Holiday made an impatient gesture. His nerves were rather ragged.

"Oh, I know that inheriting another fortune doesn't mean much to such a lucky blighter as you," replied the solicitor; "some folk haven't the intelligence to know when they're well off," he added. "There's something happened to you, Holiday; have you gone daft over a girl?"

The man he addressed endeavoured to fling the cigarette

he had been smoking into the office grate, but only managed to send it into a leather chair whose handsome appearance was meant to impress clients.

"If that chair's ruined, I'll send you in a bill for a new one —and that'll cost you thirty guineas," stormed Farquhar.

Holiday jumped up, glad of the diversion. Usually a man who took life as he found it—finding it exceedingly good, incidentally—he was now on edge. He wanted to leave the country and yet he was tied to London—a city in whose every street as he walked he fancied he could see the face of the girl he would have given anything to forget.

Many times a day he cursed himself for his folly. To what depths of humiliation had he sunk! It was inconceivable that he could have become such a fool, and yet the truth bit into his soul; he was madly infatuated with a girl who was a complete stranger to him—and who belonged to another man. Without her he felt he could not go on living, and yet he knew that if ever they met again, he would find himself hating her.

He had kept away from Traill. It were far better for him not to meet Peter. Many men's fine friendship had been irretrievably blighted by a woman, and theirs was merely another instance. He doubted if ever he could regain the old standing with Traill. Certainly he would not be able to do so until the memory of that moment when he had seen the girl's face showing itself round the door in the Adelphi flat was blotted out—and would that ever happen? He doubted it. How ironical that he, a man who had been socially styled "The Monk," because of his unfailing attitude of indifference

towards women, should now have lost his head completely —and over a hussy. . . . For what other type than this would consent to stay a night in a man's rooms? And yet, when he recalled her face as she had talked to him in the *wagon-lit* on the train, it was difficult to believe. . . . But there he was again—crazy fool—speculating, wondering, conjecturing, puzzling his already addled brain over something which he should have cast so completely out of his mind that it would never have been able to enter it again.

But he was powerless—as helpless as a swimmer struggling against a current that was too strong for him to break through.

The funeral was fixed for the Saturday. Miss Margaret Tweedale, who had lived in a Georgian house on the crest of Hampstead Heath, had left instructions in her will that she was to be laid to rest in the churchyard of the beautiful old Hampstead Parish Church.

It was one of those dull, dreary days in early May when spring, as reluctant as any woman to disclose her mind, hides herself as though afraid she is not attractive enough to be seen, and a grey, leaden sky made the imaginative feel depressed and wonder vaguely at the meaning of existence. To Holiday, young and healthy and, in the ordinary circumstance, temperamentally in love with life, the mere thought of death was intolerable. He hated sadness of any kind, not because he was a moral coward, but because it seemed such a flaw and a blemish on the whole scheme of existence. Who would wish to be born to woe? He was the type who re-

garded even a minor ailment as being something degrading and contemptible.

To-day, he was sobered. With that oak coffin resting so near him, it was impossible to ignore the sense of gloom. His Aunt Margaret had not been the most amiable of women, and he had not seen a great deal of her in recent years. This was due, in part, because he never knew what to talk to her about when he called, and partly, to the fact that he spent such a big proportion of the year abroad. But now that she was dead, he wished he had shown her more consideration.

In the hushed atmosphere of the church, with the officiating clergyman uttering the majestically solemn words of the burial-service, he felt his soul gripped. Yes, he wished he had been more decent to this lonely old woman now lying cold in that coffin; the rebuking memory came that he had never—or very rarely—put himself out in order to give her a pleasure. His aunt had not been the kind to wear her heart upon her sleeve, and she had never professed any special affection for her only living relative, but that letter which she had written to him the day before she died, proved that he had always been very dear to her. He wished —but how futile were wishes now. . . .

Only a few persons were gathered round the graveside, and, in consequence, Holiday could not help noticing the woman dressed in grey, whose attitude was one of sternly repressed grief. Although her figure was young, this stranger wore a veil which alone signalled her out for attention. Through this thin screen, it seemed as though her eyes were

red with weeping. So much he had seen at a casual glance.

Who could she be? In his present mood, Holiday felt himself akin to her; they were companions because they were sharing the same feelings. She was mourning the loss of a woman who probably had been a great friend—or perhaps Aunt Margaret had been this woman's benefactress. Farquhar, who was in bed with lumbago, had told him how generous his aunt had been in many diverse ways during her lifetime.

A friend or a benefactress—what did it matter? She was grief-stricken, and he felt sorry for her on that account.

It was because of this feeling of latent sympathy that he stopped when, the last sad rites over, the woman approached him timidly.

"You are Mr. Gerald Holiday, I believe?" she said in a voice so low he was only just able to catch the words.

He nodded.

"Yes, that is my name."

"You would not know me. I do not suppose your aunt, Miss Tweedale, ever mentioned me to you—my name, I should explain, is Grove, Miss Ursula Grove."

"I do not remember her doing so, Miss Grove. But then," he added quickly, "there is not very much significance in that. During her lifetime I did not see a great deal of Miss Tweedale, and she did not discuss her affairs with me. She was rather strong-minded, and generally regarded her own advice as being better than anyone else's."

"I know from personal experience that is very true," was the answer; "and yet she had a heart of pure gold. She

was the dearest friend I have ever had. It is terrible to think that I shall never see her again." A shiver passed through the speaker.

The two were now walking down the churchyard towards the gate.

"The reason I summoned up sufficient courage to address you, Mr. Holiday," said the veiled woman, after a pause, "is because about a year ago Miss Tweedale entrusted to me certain manuscripts. I believe she contemplated at this time writing a history of her family. I should explain, perhaps, that I am a member of the Lyceum Club, where your aunt occasionally called and had tea with me. I may say I am a professional preparer of manuscripts for the Press. At least," with an almost contemptuous shrug of the shoulders, "that is how I style myself when I advertise in the literary journals. Actually, I am a poorly paid hack-writer, making barely sufficient to keep my head above water and to maintain my club subscription. If it had not been for the generosity of your aunt, I am afraid I should have gone under long before."

"I am sorry." Holiday felt uncomfortable. He realized that the reply was almost banal, and certainly inadequate, but he did not know what else to say. Now that he had time, he was able to notice that the clothes of this woman, although once good in quality, were now almost threadbare. The gloves she wore were darned in several places. Undoubtedly the woman was very poor.

"It was your aunt who gave me these clothes," she said shakily.

They reached the gate.

"One minute before you get into your car, Mr. Holiday." There was a feverish intensity in the woman's voice. A hand was touching his arm. Although this talk was painful, he felt compelled to listen.

"Don't think I want to beg; I'd rather starve than that!" the nerve-ridden voice went on. "It's about Miss Tweedale's manuscripts. I have been working hard on them. Your aunt was a woman of surprising talent; and I know it was her dearest wish that one in particular—the history of her family—should be published. I remember her saying to me about six months ago: 'Ursula'—she always called me 'Ursula' instead of 'Miss Grove'—'if I cannot get any firm to take the "History," I'll publish it at my own expense.' I always imagined she might have left some such instructions in her will." She waited, as though expecting an answer.

"There was no reference to any literary work in her will," Holiday replied. "I am seeing her solicitor to-night, however, and if you would care for me to do so, I will mention the matter to him."

She shook her head.

"I pray you not to do that," she said earnestly. "Miss Tweedale told me once how, when she brought up the subject of the 'History' to her solicitor, he became contemptuous of the idea, throwing ridicule on it. He was rude enough to say that there were far too many books published already, and he doubted if anyone would be induced to read this one. A waste of time, labour, and money, he described it. If you

referred to him, I am sure he would place every obstacle in the way."

"Yes, I can imagine him doing that." It was the sort of language Farquhar would use. "But I am afraid I must be going, Miss Grove." He looked at his car. "Can I drive you anywhere?"

"Are you returning to the West End? If so, you might drop me at the Lyceum Club in Piccadilly, if you would be so kind."

"Certainly." He held open the door for her to enter.

"You have been extremely kind to me, Mr. Holiday," she said when the car had started; "I wonder if I might trespass further on your good nature?"

"Of course," he murmured. He was very sorry for this vague, ineffectual creature, but she was beginning to bore him. He found it difficult to understand how his aunt, that very strong-minded person, could have become so tolerant with Ursula Grove. There must have been more than one unsuspected depth of goodness in Margaret Tweedale's nature.

"I wish you would advise me on this manuscript. You see, it is practically completed and I don't know what to do with it. I feel I must follow out dear Miss Tweedale's wishes, and yet . . ."

"Have you been paid for the work you have done?"

"There is only a matter of a pound or so owing."

"You must permit me to pay you that now." He drew a note-case out of his pocket.

He held out to her two pounds, which she refused.

"I cannot take more than I am actually owed. When I get home, I will make out an exact account and send it on. As I have told you, however, it is the fate of the book I am worried about, not the small sum due to me. Might I bring it or send it for you to glance through? Then perhaps you would recommend a publisher."

Holiday reluctantly replaced the notes in his case. This woman, with her rigid conscientiousness, made him feel uncomfortable. It was a distressing thought that whilst he possessed a great deal more money than he could ever want, she probably scarcely knew where her next meal was coming from. And yet there must be thousands like her in London or any other great city. The bewildering puzzle of life engulfed him again.

"Might I bring the manuscript?" Miss Grove asked before he could answer. She was pathetically eager.

"Yes, certainly—can you manage to-night?" He thought about asking her to dinner, but put the idea out of his head. The woman might be nervous, and again, he really did not think he could struggle through a meal with her. It was not only unchivalrous, but cowardly, yet he was glad when she replied: "If nine o'clock would not be too late, I could manage to-night."

"That's splendid." He anticipated being terribly bored—what earthly interest could there be in a history dealing with a family which was merely of third-rate importance at the best?—but the thing would be over and done with in half an hour at the latest. He would get her to leave the MS. But for having already made the arrangement, he could have

asked her to send the thing by registered post. As it was—but the car had reached Oxford Street by this time, and the chauffeur was cutting through towards Piccadilly.

The car stopped outside the well-known woman's club. Holiday helped the woman to the pavement and gave her a card.

"I shall expect you at nine o'clock, Miss Grove—allow me to send my car for you."

"Oh, no, no!" She shook her head. "Like a certain famous character in Dickens, I know my place, Mr. Holiday. It would not be at all becoming if a poor, struggling person like myself was permitted to ride about in expensive motor-cars—not that I haven't enjoyed the journey back from Hampstead very much."

Having watched her walk up the Club steps, Holiday got back into the car. This woman depressed him. In spite of her humility—whether real or assumed, he could not quite decide—she possessed a remarkably strong personality. Strong, that was, in its effect upon other people; he had felt himself becoming sapped by the woman. The prospect of meeting her again took on the aspect of an ordeal.

Arrived at his rooms, he found a welcome surprise in the person of a tall, athletic man of early middle-age.

"Thought I'd take you on the hop, Holiday," said John Van Lyn; "I flew over from Paris this morning on my way to Scotland, where I'm staying with the Courcys before sailing back to the States. I'm leaving by the night-train, and I must see one or two people before, but if you have nothing better on, what about dining with me?"

"That's a bet, John." He liked Van Lyn, an old polo-field comrade, and welcomed the chance to have his thoughts diverted from his own affairs. "Where shall it be?—I'll book a table."

"Somewhere quiet," replied the American. "I shan't be dressing. What about one of those Soho joints?"

"If you'll be content with just my company and good food, I'll take you to Gustave's in Greek Street."

"That'll suit me fine," said Van Lyn, clipping a cigar; "and now tell me, how have things been going with you, Jerry, old man? Did you have a good time on the Riviera? Sorry to have missed you, but I was fixed for Egypt this winter and I just couldn't get away. I have some news for you, Jerry: I'm going to be married."

"Married?"

"You needn't look so surprised," laughed the American; "I know I've left it a bit late in the day—but the girl who's becoming my wife has been worth the waiting for."

"I can well believe it—congratulations, old man!"

Although Van Lyn doubtless intended to hear the other's news when he called, like the majority of lovers, he displayed a decided tendency to rhapsody. He monopolized the talk until he left half an hour later. According to him, Providence fashioned just one Margery Merriman and then threw the mould away.

It proved a dangerous subject for the listener. Holiday wished his old sports-friend well, but Van Lyn's spirited eulogy of the girl he was shortly to marry brought back a memory which the events of that day had done something

temporarily to obliterate. He, too, might have been given to rhapsody if . . . But that way mental torment lay, and so, when Van Lyn had gone, he occupied himself by writing letters.

Mercifully the American talked about other subjects at dinner. He became interested in the small restaurant hidden away at the back of the Palace Theatre, and he and the jovial French proprietor, now inclined to rotundity, soon developed friendship. M. Gustave showed his visitors his framed treasures—an article written by a famous gourmet, extolling a meal he had once eaten at the restaurant; a letter of appreciation by a monarch of a Mid-European State; and a signed photograph of the French G.H.Q. Staff for whom Gustave had the honour of acting as chef during the world-war.

Holiday was willing enough to leave the meal to Gustave, and the proprietor showed his appreciation by serving them himself.

After the first mouthful of chicken casserole, the American beckoned to the Frenchman.

"Monsieur?"

"M. Gustave, at last I know why the Allies won the war," said Van Lyn.

"Yes, Monsieur?"

"Because you cooked for 'em!"

As nine o'clock struck, Holiday returned to his flat.

"I am expecting a lady to call, Somers."

"Yes, sir. A telegram arrived half an hour ago, sir."

As he took the buff envelope from the salver, he recalled the last telegram he had received. That had been a message from an enemy—Stadenfeld.

Was this another?

He ripped the envelope open and read:

Ill. Afraid dying. Must see you about book.

It was signed "Ursula Grove," and there followed an address in North Kensington.

CHAPTER XI

"VERY NEAR TO DEATH!"

HOLIDAY's first impression as he read the telegram again was one of resentment. He had seen sufficient of death that day. He wanted to forget the horror, not to be reminded of it.

Then came a feeling of reluctant sympathy. He remembered how shaky and ill that storm-tossed creature, Ursula Grove, had appeared at the funeral. Nerve-ridden she undoubtedly was; but what could have happened during the few intervening hours? Perhaps a hidden malady from which she was suffering had struck her down without warning—there were heart-diseases that killed that way, he believed.

Dying. Repugnant as the prospect was, he must go to the woman. After all, she had been a friend of his aunt. And there was another side: the woman was in dire distress. She might be in urgent need of financial help. Perhaps even the money spent on that telegram could scarcely be spared.

"I'm going out for a couple of hours, Somers," he told his servant; "but I hope to be back by eleven at the latest."

"Very good, sir."

Putting on the light overcoat which he had flung across the back of a chair, Holiday walked round to the garage, had his car taken out and was quickly on his way.

He found the address without much difficulty. It was in a street off the Portobello Road, and was just such a house as he had pictured this woman, struggling hard against ill-luck, would be living in. As he stopped the car, he felt it almost an affront to decency to bring a Bentley to such a district.

Evidently he was expected, for, by the time he reached the top step of the short flight leading from the pavement, the door stood open.

A slatternly maid could be seen.

"Does Miss Grove live here?" he asked.

The servant nodded before breaking into a monotonous whine.

"Very bad she is—the doctor's with 'er now. Took all of a sudden she was when she was 'aving 'er cup of tea—and now she's dying."

Holiday interrupted the further snuffling.

"My name is Holiday—Miss Grove is expecting me."

The servant brightened.

"Oh, is you the gen'l'man what I sent the telegram to? 'Er breath was that bad she could scarcely speak, but she was most pertickler to arsk me to run all the way to the post-office."

"Very good of you." Holiday held out some silver, which she took eagerly. "And now, please let the doctor know that I am here."

"I will that," replied the uncouth servant; "you wait 'ere a minute, will you?"

The hall in which he stood was typical of a mean London

house in a mean London street. It was shabbily furnished—the linoleum was worn bare in several places—and at the end was a wretched stairway leading downwards. Up this floated a nauseating combination of odours, in which the smell of rancid frying fat predominated. What a place in which to die.

"The doctor says will you please come up?"

Here was the slatternly servant again, her dirty face peering over the banisters.

The stairs creaked as he climbed to the third floor. The girl stopped.

"In there," she pointed with a grimy finger.

"She ain't got long to live, pore soul, so 'urry up," were her parting words before scuttling down the stairs.

He hesitated for a moment, endeavouring to prepare himself for the ordeal. A dying woman in that house so depressing as to desolate the mind. . . .

Then, after tapping on the door, he entered.

The first thing he saw was the back of a man bending over the bed in the opposite corner. This must be the doctor, of course. The latter turned, motioning the other to be quiet. Tiptoeing from the side of the bed, he put his hand on Holiday's arm and drew him away from the door.

"You are Mr. Holiday?" he inquired in a whisper.

Holiday nodded.

"It's her heart, you know," said the medical man confidentially: "this has been threatening for years. Six months ago she had rather a severe operation, and this left her very

weak. Then, what with over-working and under-feeding, what could be expected?"

"Is she asleep now?" Holiday asked. This catalogue of physical defects depressed him—was there nothing in the world but disease?—and he wanted to get out of the room, out of the house, and out of the neighbourhood. He felt he would not be able to breathe freely until he was back at the wheel of his car again.

"I have just given her an injection to ease the pain," was the answer, "but I know what she wished to see you about. It is a book."

"Yes."

"Poor woman, she attaches such importance to it that it is beneath her pillow at the present time. Ah! she has recognized you. . . ."

It was true. The dying woman was trying to sit up in bed. Her face, ghastly with the evidences of pain, showed traces of feverish excitement.

"Will you come over? She wishes to speak to you," announced the doctor, standing by the bedside.

Holiday hesitated.

"But won't the excitement be too much?—not that I know anything about it," he added.

"The end is quite near, in any case—and speaking to you will ease her mind."

To Holiday the position was not only distasteful, but somewhat ridiculous. How could his presence help? Nevertheless, he approached the bed.

"Bend down, Mr. Holiday," said Ursula Grove. Her voice was so low, the words scarcely rose above a whisper. Her eyes were burning.

Conquering his repugnance, the visitor stooped.

"Listen carefully to what I have to say, Mr. Holiday . . . you are very near to death."

Was the woman crazy? Very near to death. *He* very near to death? The woman must be distraught. She was referring to herself, of course.

"I believe you want to talk to me about the book, Miss Grove." He decided to ignore the previous words.

"I tell you, you are very near to death!"

Whilst he stared at her, the woman's hands shot upwards. They fastened on his throat. He tried to disentangle them, but they were like hooks of steel.

And this woman was dying. . . .

Dying! It was a farce—the whole thing was an elaborately staged hoax! He had been tricked. This was a move of the enemy—the enemy he had run up against through helping that girl on the Riviera express. Perhaps Stadenfeld was in it.

This confounded woman—who could she be? Then the blindness fell from his eyes: he remembered now. She was the woman who had walked by Aubrey Stadenfeld's side that night at the Berkeley. The reason she had worn a veil at the funeral was now clear: she was afraid he might recognize her.

And this doctor?

A laugh sounded behind him. Was that smooth-tongued

medico, with his easy professional manner and his low-pitched tones, also a crook?

He tore himself free of the clutching fingers and turned about. As he did so, a cloud of fine spray made him choke. He had a sight of the "doctor" standing a few feet away, working what looked like a miniature garden syringe; noticed that the man's eyes were gleaming with an evil light, and then all power seemed to leave him. Something far more deadly than the woman criminal's fingers were robbing him of air.

"I think that should be sufficient," he heard the man with the syringe say, and then, with the woman's answering laugh ringing in his ears, he slipped into unconsciousness.

CHAPTER XII

THE WATCHER

Valerie Insall was troubled. There had been sufficient worries in her life before, but now a fresh one had been added—and one that was giving her great anxiety. Ever since that morning at Peter Traill's flat, her conscience had rebuked her. The opportunity having presented itself, she should have taken it. She should have spoken to the man Holiday.

Two causes had held her back. The first was the expression on the man's face. Holiday had looked at her with such scathing contempt that the memory sent a rush of blood to her face. How dared he? What had she done? That was the first reason why she had hesitated.

The second was far more important. She had given her promise to Traill not to allow Holiday to proceed any farther with this business. For all his attitude of lazy good nature, Holiday would be true to his type—he would welcome an adventure, no matter what degree of danger it held. She was sure of this.

Undoubtedly Traill had been right: Holiday must be kept out of it. To begin with, this was essentially a personal matter; and then again, he must be protected against himself.

But—and this was the point over which she suffered bitter self-reproach—Holiday, having proved himself such a

sportsman, was entitled at least to her thanks. And all she had done was to look at him as though he were a stranger. Could greater ingratitude have been shown?

The thought gave her almost as much mental discomfort as the look of contempt on Holiday's face.

That morning at the flat she had promised Peter Traill once again that she would cut Holiday out of her life—that she would neither meet him nor write to him.

"I don't suppose for a moment you will want to do either," Traill had commented, after making his request; "and in any case, Holiday is pretty indifferent to women, however charming they may be. But we must keep him out of it. He's risked his life once and that must be sufficient. As regards thanks, Bishop and I have already told him how grateful we are."

"I feel that something more is due to him than that," she had said. "Suppose I should happen to meet him accidentally? Mustn't I speak?"

Traill, or so it had seemed to her at the time, had partially evaded the issue.

"It's not very likely that you'll run across Holiday," he said; "he's a restless fellow, never staying put in one place long, and always wandering off somewhere abroad. And now," Traill had gone on, "suppose we eliminate Holiday, interesting person as he is, and talk a little about ourselves?"

How vividly the scene returned to her. She and Peter were seated before the fire. A littered breakfast-table was behind them. Traill's hand had stretched out and placed itself on hers.

"Valerie!—how marvellous to see you again!—Oh, my dear! . . ."

It was the moment she had expected—and dreaded.

"Peter—please!"

He had released her hand immediately.

"You will never listen to me, Val—don't you realize how much I love you?"

"Yes," she had said, "and you know what I have always replied: 'Wait.' "

His answer had been gloomy.

"I've never had much faith in that theory. If you don't love me now, Val, you never will. There's no doubt about love—the real thing, I mean. The only consolation I've got is that there isn't any other man. Or perhaps——?"

"No, Peter—there's no one else. I don't think there ever will be—I am not that type."

"Nonsense!" he exclaimed emphatically: "you were made for a man's love. It's sacrilege to think anything else. One day it will be bound to happen. How can you, any more than any other woman, hope to prevail against nature, my dear? Some day you will love a man. . . ."

Deep down in her heart she knew this to be so. The conviction had come to her, astonishingly enough, in a flash; and the knowledge was overwhelming. Only a minute before she had stated what she honestly and seriously considered to be the truth; yet now she knew that she had lied. An innocent lie it had been, but the realization of how she herself had been deceived, caused banners of confusion to flame in her cheeks.

Looking at her, Peter Traill had sighed.

"You know that what I am saying is true," he remarked; and to this she had no reply.

It was impossible to forget this talk. Impossible, also, to ignore the fact that immediately after Traill had said the words, the figure of Gerald Holiday returned to her mind. Why this should have happened she was unable to say: sufficient was it that, having appeared, thought of the man refused to leave.

Sitting now in her own tiny flat just off Shepherd's Market, she was still haunted—was haunted the word? If not, she could not think of a better one—by the face of Holiday as she had last seen it. That look of contempt! Why should he have looked at her in such a way? Was it because he believed she had spent the night in Traill's rooms? The reflections which this conjured up gave her many conflicting emotions.

Anger predominated. She had been forced to stay. Peter Traill, whom she knew she could absolutely trust, had pleaded so hard that at last she had consented. He had pointed out how late it was; he had reminded her that if he accompanied her back to her own flat—as of course he would, unless she stayed—he would have to leave the case unprotected. That would mean a certain risk, especially after what had already happened that night.

"In any case, I hate to think of you going back to an empty flat, Val," he had said finally—and with that she had agreed to wait until the morning. After all, where was the harm? Peter was one of her dearest friends; they were col-

leagues as well as friends—anyone who could think evil of such a perfectly innocent occurrence was beneath contempt. Holiday must be a cad to harbour such an idea. And yet, if the horrible thought had not crossed his mind, why had he looked at her in that fashion?

But what did it matter? Holiday's thoughts did not concern her, she argued. The man was a stranger, and it was unlikely that she would meet him again. If she did, she would thank him briefly for what he had done, and that would be an end.

As so often happens when one endeavours to plan a certain line of conduct, Valerie's resolution to dismiss Gerald Holiday from her thoughts was not successful. Her favourite newspaper proved a hindrance. It published a photograph of Holiday the next morning. He was shown in polo-kit, and beneath the picture was the caption: "Mr. Gerald Holiday, the famous International polo-player, whose aunt, Miss Margaret Tweedale, so well known for her interest in many charitable institutions, has just died."

She did not suppose that Holiday, any more than the average man, would be overwhelmed with grief over the death of a mere aunt, but, nevertheless, she felt herself sympathizing with him. To come straight back to a funeral must have meant a depressing return to London.

By reaching out a hand she could touch the telephone. It would be simple to ring Holiday up. In that way she could convey her thanks impersonally. Then her mind would

be free and her conscience clear. And if she should chance to meet the man afterwards, there would be no obligation on her part to stop and speak.

The temptation was strong, but she resisted it. In doing so she felt she was keeping the promise she had made to Peter Traill.

She had arranged to dine that night at the Ritz. An American girl, Maisie Chard, whom she had met in Paris, was to be her companion.

The evening was not very successful. Her hostess pleaded forgiveness for being so dull on account of a terribly bad headache. Conversation languished, and the meal seemed endless in consequence. After coffee, Valerie had suggested that the proposed theatre should be declared "off," and that her hostess should go straight to bed.

"I think I will, darling," said the American girl, "do forgive me—and ring me up soon."

Having made a conventionally appropriate reply, Valerie wished the other good-bye and left the restaurant.

As it was still early, she decided to walk home. Crossing Piccadilly, she found herself after a while in a thoroughfare which was familiar. It was Mount Street. She realized the fact with a start, for she had been walking merely by sense of direction instead of set design.

She recalled the number of the house in which Gerald Holiday lived—221. Looking at the number which she was passing, she saw that Holiday's home was only six houses ahead.

She had taken a couple more steps when she drew back. There was a man standing outside No. 221—a man she recognized.

It was Benelli.

CHAPTER XIII

STADENFELD TALKS

The first thing of which Holiday was conscious when he came to was the perfectly horrible taste in his mouth. The drug which had been squirted into his face had done more than rob him of consciousness; it had put a permanent kink in his palate. He felt he wanted to drink gallons of liquid before that vileness left his tongue and throat.

He was so absorbed by this initial impression that it was some little while before he troubled to look about him. There was a blur over his eyes, but after a while he managed to visualize his surroundings fairly clearly.

He was in a kind of loft—what might have been the upper part of a large stable or garage. He formed this idea because of the general shape of the room, and the fact that high up in the sloping roof was a skylight. This was so begrimed that it could not have been cleaned for years.

There was no furniture in the room. He was lying on a floor which, like the skylight, was loathsomely unclean. He was unable to move because both arms and legs were bound.

None of these discoveries added to his peace of mind. And, as memory returned, Gerald Holiday became a very different person from his normal self. He felt his blood threatening to burst through his veins. Had he been given

the opportunity and possessed the power, he would have done murder. He was in a highly dangerous mental state—and, physically, completely helpless.

What a fool he had been! Outwitted by a woman! Betrayed through his own sense of decency! This, instead of softening the blow, increased his anger; it proved the filthy methods of those on the other side. They had banked on his falling into the trap. Why this had been set so deliberately he could not tell—and in any case, that didn't matter now. What did matter was that he was a prisoner.

Of course, he would escape—sooner or later. He had sufficient confidence to reassure himself on that point; it was ridiculous to think otherwise. And when he had escaped, he would spend the rest of his life bringing these swine to justice. That was after he had had an innings himself. He would teach them that he was not entirely a congenital idiot. He would prove that there was a certain risk attached to manhandling him in this way. What was the game? Was Stadenfeld—for of course he was in it—intending to have his revenge for that little affair in Taviton Street a few nights before? It looked like it.

He wished someone would come—that something would happen. It was cursedly cold in that room, and, apart from the beastliness in his mouth, he felt stiff all over. He ached everywhere—ached abominably. Those ropes round his limbs were infernally tight.

Time passed, and with it went some of his anger. It was ridiculous, he told himself, but that sense of fear which had crept on him, soft-footed, persisted in spite of his contempt.

It was little use being enraged: this thing, incredible as it might have seemed to anyone in his sober senses, had happened. And this was merely the first act: there must be others to follow. Not an agreeable thought.

Holiday was not afraid for his own sake. That sense of fear which was causing him worry had found a lodgment in his mind through an entirely different reason. The reflection came: If these people could go to so much trouble to trap him, it seemed impossible to believe that the girl—their chief concern, since she must have badly outwitted them through that card-case—could escape for long. This gang was not only ruthless, but clever; they planned with ingenuity, they schemed with skill.

One thing his present predicament did: it convinced him once again of a truth that was unassailable. The morning he had left Peter Traill's Adelphi flat, he had sworn to cut that girl out of his life entirely. But for the unexpected death of his aunt, he might have done so from the point of actual physical contact; but, Fate having stepped in once again, he knew that this was now impossible. Their destinies had become linked: for good or ill their futures were intertwined. The very reason why he had been captured was because of his association with the girl. That girl who—but he would not permit himself to remember that now.

Opposite him was a heavy door, having bands of iron placed across it in the form of an X. His musings were interrupted by seeing this open.

Three people stepped into the room. They were in this order: The woman who had decoyed him came first; then

Stadenfeld, the brain behind the scheme, no doubt; and lastly the man who had masqueraded as the doctor in that "fuggy" North Kensington bedroom. All appeared to be in very good spirits.

They ranged themselves round the prisoner and the woman laughed. It was a laugh in which contempt and malignity were combined. It held a biting mockery.

Holiday looked up at her.

"Thank you, madam; you can rely upon me to remember that. The joke is with you at present, of course, but I may have another chance."

The woman was on the point of replying when Stadenfeld courteously waved her aside. With a frown that changed quickly into a smile, she obeyed the unspoken request.

Stadenfeld took the floor.

"I should not place too much reliance on that hope, Holiday," he said; "for your own peace of mind, I really should not. As you no doubt realize, we have gone to considerable trouble to get you here, and it would be unforgivably foolish on our part, now that you are here, to allow you to escape. What is more, such a contingency would upset the plans which we have made, and in which you are such an important factor. If you will take my advice—and, believe me, it is well-meant——"

The smooth flow of words were cut off by a second burst of laughter. The woman held back her head and shrieked. Her mirth proved contagious, for the doctor was forced to join in. His cachinnations were hearty enough to show how

thoroughly he appreciated the joke, although his mirth was more controlled than his companion's.

"I was not aware that I had said anything very humorous," remarked Stadenfeld, looking at the others. There was a slightly bewildered expression on his face. "I was merely advising the young man for his good."

"Oh, come off it!" cried the woman; "you'd make the Pope laugh, Staddy."

"Much obliged, I'm sure," was the response; "I can't say that I've ever visualized myself as a mirth-maker to Principalities and Powers, but if you say so, Lulu, I suppose I must acknowledge the gift. However——"

But there was another interruption.

"I hate to break in," said the prisoner dryly, "but if you have completely finished exchanging compliments, perhaps you will be good enough to explain this outrage. I am very interested."

If he had intended to remove the smile from the fat man's face and to change the manner of the others completely, he was successful.

"That is soon done," said Stadenfeld crisply, and it might have been another man speaking; "you are here because I wanted you.

"I am afraid this kind of game is rather out of your class, Holiday," he continued, with such scorn in his voice that the prisoner seethed; "you had much better have stuck to your polo-playing. This is another kind of sport, and frankly you do not appear to possess the necessary mental equipment

for it. You may plead with justice that you are inexperienced, and that you would improve as time went on. But I am afraid that such an opportunity will not be given you. You have meddled and you must pay the penalty. If you had taken the chance I gave you the other night, you might have been spared this; as it is, your friends must be prepared for your absence."

Holiday, although words were boiling on his tongue, restrained himself because he believed there was more to come. Stadenfeld was a great man—he had no doubt about that, crook though the fellow was—but like many other great men he had a weakness: he appeared to love to hear himself talk.

He was correct in his judgment.

"To dismiss for a moment, however, the somewhat gloomy trend of our talk," continued the speaker, "let me enlighten you on what I am sure is at the moment a matter of some perplexity. After that recent upset in Taviton Street, I had to satisfy my sense of honour. Owing to a piece of ill-luck, I had failed in a personal mission. Now, it is not a habit of mine to fail, and so I set myself the task of bringing you to heel."

"You'll never do that, Stadenfeld," was the determined reply.

Stadenfeld greeted the challenge with a nonchalant wave of the hand.

"We shall see," he said; "I have certain resources of which you are unaware. And now, if you will be good enough not to interrupt again, I will resume.

"As I have already said, you were given a chance the other night which you should have taken. It was a great mistake on your part. Had you fallen in with my wishes, nothing more would have been said; the matter would have been finished between us so far as you are concerned. Whatever measures I might have adopted towards the men Bishop and Traill, and the girl Insall, you would have been left alone."

"Very kind of you," remarked the prisoner.

"Shut up!" interrupted the woman in a shrill voice.

Stadenfeld bent towards her.

"Not so loudly, Lulu, my dear," he entreated, so gently he might have been speaking to a child; "you may injure our friend's *morale*—and he will require all his nervous strength later on."

There was a subtle, but sinister threat underlying the words, and the woman, as though understanding this, nodded. She seemed a savage creature, and Holiday wondered why she should show him so much hostility. After all, he was a complete stranger to her.

"I do wish you would make an effort to control yourself and not interrupt," Stadenfeld said, looking down at the captive. "I am reluctant as yet to employ my friend's services, but if you cannot learn good manners, I may be compelled to do so. You have your bag with you, doctor?" he asked the other man.

"It is within easy reach," was the answer. Stadenfeld's assistants were an unpleasant lot, Holiday decided: this so-called doctor had a disagreeable smirk on his pallid face.

Was he the gang's official torturer? He remembered having read somewhere or other that when a doctor kicked over the traces he always made the worst type of criminal. Looking at this man, he could well believe it.

"And now perhaps you will permit me to carry on," Stadenfeld continued, in his odiously mellifluent voice. "Had you been sensible, as I have previously remarked, we should have left you alone. But your refusal to do so compels me to act up to the spirit of the telegram I had sent to you on the night of my escape from the police. You are, I believe, a wealthy man, Holiday—wealthy men, I confess, interest me; in your case, that interest is intensified considerably. If the information is correct, you are worth something more than four hundred thousand pounds. Quite a useful sum: when it passes to us—as of course it will—we shall make very good use of it, I promise you."

The temptation to laugh up in the speaker's face was very powerful. He controlled it because he happened to catch the look on the woman's face. She was bending forward, and her eyes were avid with excitement. The beringed hands kept opening and shutting like the claws of a vulture. . . .

"You, no doubt, wonder how we shall be able to effect the transfer of this considerable sum," went on Stadenfeld; "but the wonders of medicine nowadays are many. Is that not so, doctor?"

The man he addressed smiled.

"Modern science can manage most things," he replied.

In spite of his resolution, Holiday felt his blood running cold. There was a reptilian expression in the pallid man's

eyes: he looked as though he could torture, or even kill, with the same utter lack of emotion as he would eat a meal. A tough crowd, undoubtedly. And this was the lot the girl—Insall her name was, then—had placed herself up against. Why? What could she be doing opposing a gang of criminals?

"Perhaps you are wondering why I should have taken so much pains in getting you here," resumed Stadenfeld—how the man loved to hear his own voice!—"when it would have been comparatively easy to have accomplished the same end in a much more simple manner. As I have remarked before, your general intelligence, Holiday, has not struck me as being of a very high standard. This being so, it amused me to stage a little comedy for your benefit. Much of my success in crime is due to my attention to detail, I may add *en parenthese*. My friend on the right—permit me to introduce you formally to Miss Lulu Chartres—proved, as on many previous occasions, an extremely capable actress. The bedroom at North Kensington—you will appreciate, I hope, the appropriateness of the address for a half-starved woman acting as handmaiden to the muse of Literature—had been specially engaged for the occasion. Even the servant-girl—whose general griminess was another appropriate 'touch,' I think—belongs in a modest way to our Organization. Have you no word of compliment, my friend?"

Holiday laughed. This rogue, master of evil as he was, possessed an impudence which was so colossal as to be actually amusing.

"It was well stage-managed, Stadenfeld; I admit that," he

said. "To be frank, I had a certain doubt about the Family History, but the acting of Miss Chartres was beyond praise. It seems to me a pity, however, that it was not devoted to a more profitable cause."

"I fail to understand, my dear Holiday." Stadenfeld, leaning slightly forward, was all polite inquiry.

"Your brain-power being so infinitely superior to mine, you should have no difficulty. At considerable trouble you have brought me to this disused loft——"

"I regret that at the moment it is the best retreat available. To-morrow, perhaps, I shall find you better quarters."

"Never mind that now. What I was going on to say was this: Although you have brought me here, it doesn't say that I'm going to do exactly what you wish."

Stadenfeld's face creased itself into a characteristic smile.

"I think you will—I really think you will," he said. "Don't you agree, Doctor?"

"Oh, quite." The medical man might have been supporting a suggested line of treatment in a comparatively simple case.

"Well, we shall see. Of course, I shall be traced: have you considered that?"

"My dear fellow," returned Stadenfeld, apparently in the highest good humour. "I have considered everything. No detail has been neglected. Believe me, you have looked your last upon that charming *pied-à-terre* of yours, 221 Mount Street. It is only fair to tell you that."

"How sad!" was the comment. "There are, I understand,

a certain number of police still in England—or have things changed since I have been away?"

"There are police, of course," returned Stadenfeld, and his smile was so steadfast that he appeared to be enjoying the conversation heartily, "but I should not set any great store upon them, my dear fellow. I hate to refer so constantly to my own small powers of organization, but you had evidence the other evening of what I think of Scotland Yard."

The captive essayed a mild taunt.

"You escaped, it's true, but you had the wind up beforehand, right enough. If you hadn't, why did you offer me that thousand pounds to take off the handcuffs?"

"Merely a bluff, my dear boy," was the easy reply. "But since you ask me, I will make you a small revelation. I took rather a liking to you; although money in your case would not have been any inducement, I imagined that the thrill of adventure might have led you to accept an offer to join us. Life, when not playing polo, must be rather a dull affair to a man like yourself."

"So far I haven't found it so." Where was the fellow leading now? This was obviously an improvisation.

"But, of course, any chance of that happening has now gone," declared Stadenfeld in a change of tone. "You have set yourself up against me and must pay the necessary penalty. As for Bishop and Traill, these two very foolish young men will be taught a very severe lesson before they are much older. They will be so occupied in looking after themselves that they will not have any time to spare for you. Believe

me, that is the truth: both have meddled too much in my affairs."

Holiday was grateful he did not mention the girl. Bishop and Traill could be depended upon to look after themselves. Facing danger seemed part of their daily lives. But the girl—what chance would she have against these fiends?

But Stadenfeld was speaking again.

"As for the girl you so chivalrously, if foolishly, helped on the Riviera express, we are making special—very special—preparations for her. We are even now expecting a messenger with news. I trust I am not a hard man," he went on, with a whine of which Pecksniff himself might not have been ashamed, "but when I remember the trouble Miss Insall has caused us, I confess I have a horror of my better feelings being overcome. In case I should hesitate, however, I have Miss Chartres and the doctor with me. They, no doubt, will be a great help!"

"You bet I will!" said Lulu Chartres.

There was so much concentrated venom in the words that Holiday shuddered.

CHAPTER XIV

THE CHASE

Valerie felt herself become tense.

There was no doubt about this man being Benelli. She could tell by the stoop of the shoulders and the turn of the head. During the nightmare period that he had watched her on the express, she had had time to commit this assassin indelibly to memory.

And now he was standing only a few yards away from her, watching the house in which Gerald Holiday lived.

Why was he watching? Was he waiting for Holiday to appear that he might attack him? He must have followed Holiday to London, either at the bidding of the Organization or because he was determined to have his revenge on the man by whom he had been outwitted.

She must warn Holiday of his danger. She could not do this directly because Benelli, standing outside the house, would be sure to recognize her as she walked past. She must remain where she was, screened by the doorway of the house in which she was sheltering, until Holiday showed himself. Directly he did so, she would give him a warning. Even then, it would possibly be too late: Benelli might shoot at sight.

She shivered with anxiety. If she walked to the nearest telephone, murder might be done whilst she was trying to

get through to Holiday. Even if she rang the bell of the house in whose doorway she stood and asked to use the telephone on a matter of life and death, tragedy might occur during the few minutes she was away from her post.

It was essential she should remain. The wait might be one of hours—but when a man's life was at stake, what mattered personal inconvenience? Swiftly she retreated farther back into the doorway, pulling the fur collar of her theatre-cloak higher round her neck.

Then came a surprise: it was as though the watcher felt that he himself was being watched. Benelli had turned and was walking away—in her direction. She saw him take a look at the upper windows of No. 221, and then she had to shrink back in case the man should see her.

Her fear that Benelli had a suspicion he himself was being spied upon, was quickly lost; the man walked straight ahead up the street, looking neither to right nor left. If he had turned his head, he must have noticed her huddled in the doorway.

She could not understand the meaning of this retreat. Had Benelli got tired of waiting? This did not seem probable. Was he going to communicate with someone else? That was possible. In any case, she decided quickly, she must follow the man. Although the information she had been able to gather at the Beauvallon villa of Prince Kuropatin had led her to the belief that the headquarters of the enemy were about to be moved to London, yet neither Bishop nor Traill had been able to get even a hint of where this G.H.Q. might be situated.

If she could trail Benelli successfully, a tremendous lot might be gained.

She was out in the road by this time. No. 221 was all in darkness; not a light showed. Perhaps it was because of this that Benelli had gone; or perhaps again, he had called at the house on some pretext and had discovered that Holiday was not at home. She must have come on the scene just as he was preparing to leave. No doubt he had halted on the pavement for a moment to consider what he should do next; and then had taken a last glance at the house before departing. Guessing at the truth in this way, Valerie started to walk rapidly up the street. She must not allow Benelli to get out of sight; already he had a good start.

Her heart sank when she saw a motor-car draw up before the man in Park Lane. Unless she could be fortunate enough to get a taxi-cab quickly, all hope of following him would be gone.

She saw Benelli—after a short talk with the driver—get into the car. Then, forgetting the caution which for the past six months she had endeavoured to form part of herself, she called "Taxi!" at the top of her voice.

Luck was with her. A passing cab halted.

"'Ere y'are, lydy," said the driver.

She rushed forward. Twenty yards ahead, Benelli's car was gathering speed.

"Follow that car—wherever it goes!" she said tensely, and, opening the door, fell backwards as the man, using the intelligence of his class, pushed in the clutch.

She found herself softly praying. So much depended upon

the driver keeping that car in sight. At the Oxford end of Park Lane he had to stop on account of a traffic-jam, but when he got clear the taxi rattled along at a crazy speed.

Soon the imposing building, which she recognized as Selfridges, was reached, and here the taxi took a sudden turn to the left. She breathed more freely: it would be easier to follow Benelli now than if he had continued down Oxford Street. It seemed likely that he was making for the heights of Hampstead or the country beyond.

The surmise was correct. Her man was forsaking the town and fleeing for the open spaces. Finchley Road followed Baker Street, and then, remarkably quickly, Golder's Green Station was reached.

By this time the excitement of the chase made her throw down the window. She leaned out.

"Can you still see it?" she asked the driver. She was forced to shout in order to make the words heard.

"Trust me, lydy. It's 'ell or bust now! George Grainger ain't one to leave a job 'arf done."

She felt content. Thank God this was England. Honest George Grainger, whose broad back induced such a satisfying sense of trust, had asked no questions. He had leapt into the breach, content to serve a lady and to gratify, perhaps, a craving for a little excitement. Valerie felt she could have hugged him.

The taxi, lurching along at a speed which threatened disaster at every turn of the wheels, kept to the left instead of going towards North Finchley. Valerie recognized an hotel

at which she had once had lunch, and knew they had reached Hendon. Open country was beyond.

The darkness now increased; lights were less numerous; she was going into a district that appealed to her imagination as taking on the character of a blind man tapping his way along with a stick. Strange how her adventures always happened at night, and in the dark. . . .

Again she leaned out of the window.

"Please do not lose sight of it, Mr. Grainger!" she said.

Perhaps it was the beauty of the speaker's voice that made a further appeal; perhaps, again, it was the novelty of being addressed as "Mr. Grainger," but the driver evidenced signs of being deeply moved.

"Trust me, lydy; the blighter—beggin' your pardon—is only jes' ahead." At the risk of hastening his departure into another world, he turned his face round.

"Want any 'elp, lydy?" he asked. "It ain't for me to push mysel', I know, but life's very dull for a man who once served in a remount depot and 'ad the 'andlin' of fifty mules. So tame like. Practically the only bit of brightness now is to try to slip past a copper when 'e's got 'is 'and up. You've only got to say the word, lydy. P'raps someone's been treatin' you bad?" he went on hopefully.

Even in the midst of her anxiety she had to laugh.

"It's awfully good of you, but——"

"Oh, never mind the 'buts,' lydy. I ses to mysel' when I sees you fust—back there in Park Lyne—I ses: 'Now that lydy's in trouble, and if she'll only let you, you've got to try

to get 'er out of it, George Grainger.' That's what I ses, lydy—and now don't go spoilin' it jes' because you think I'm lettin' off a lot of 'ot air."

"I don't think that, Mr. Grainger——"

The second "Mr. Grainger" nearly made the taxi crash into the kerb, but with a tremendous effort the man at the wheel righted it.

Then suddenly he pulled up with a jerk.

"That car's stopped," he said hoarsely; "what do you want me to do now, lydy?"

CHAPTER XV

THE LIGHT IN THE ROOF

The words brought her up sharply. They made her realize how near she was to a crisis. Action must now take the place of thought; the time for speculation was gone. Reality faced her.

"Are you sure, Mr. Grainger?" she asked.

For reply, the taxi-driver held up his hand.

"Listen," he said.

No sound could be heard but a gentle purring. This came from the darkness ahead.

" 'E's left 'is engine runnin'—but the car's stopped right enough," declared the expert.

"Yes," and then she added quickly: "Your lights! Put them out, please—they mustn't be seen. Do you think they could have heard us?"

"I'll stake my life they 'aven't, lydy—they was going too fast to 'ear anythin' but their own noise. Besides, this road is free to all, ain't it? I should say so."

"I know—but I did not want them to think they were being followed. It is vitally important they shouldn't have guessed."

"I wouldn't let that worry you, Miss—but off goes the lights, anyway." He switched off the headlamps.

"Thank you—how much do I owe you, Mr. Grainger?"

The taxi-driver, who, standing in the roadway disclosed himself as a huge, unwieldy figure in a thick overcoat, sucked his teeth meditatively.

"Lydy," he said, "this is no affair of mine, and I 'ope you'll excuse me buttin' in—but I don't like it. No, I don't like it. 'Ere y'are, a real lydy, as anyone could see with 'arf an eye, and you wants me to put you down in a country road where it's as black as pitch, and at ten o'clock at night, to go off follerin' a man—lydy," he broke off sharply, "you'll 'ave to let me come with you."

"I couldn't do that, Mr. Grainger—much as I appreciate your kindness. It might be dangerous. The man who has been travelling in that car is a murderer."

"A murrrderrrerrr!" George Grainger mouthed the word with combined relish and apprehension. But relish predominated, whilst excitement flavoured the whole.

"*You've* got no right to tackle any murderer, lydy," he added reprovingly; "not in that kind of dress, anyway. Why, lydy, you'd just come from a restaurant, 'adn't you, when you 'ailed me?"

"Yes—but I must go. The man will escape."

"I'm waitin' 'ere to drive you back—and at the first suspicious sound I shall pop along mysel'. I don't like it, lydy, straight I don't. Let me come with you!"

"No—but I shall be glad for you to drive me back to the West End later on."

George Grainger nodded glumly.

With that she turned and walked ahead. Too much time

had been wasted already. If Benelli had got away, she would not forgive herself.

She was so excited that she forgot the extraordinary nature of this undertaking; a woman in thin shoes and evening-dress endeavouring to track a desperate criminal—a man who had recently committed a foul murder—to his lair.

When this realization flooded through her, she hesitated momentarily. Should she have accepted the extremely sportsmanlike offer which this taximan had made? His assistance might have proved invaluable. Then she gained reassurance: she could not lead this stranger into such terrible possible danger. For herself, it was a necessary part of the work which she had voluntarily undertaken and to which she was resolved to devote, if needs be, the rest of her life.

A sound there was no mistaking caused her to shrink against the hedge. She pulled the big collar of her cloak still higher. Fortunately, her general colour-scheme was black: only her face would show white in the darkness.

The car swept past her. One fear was gone, but another instantly took its place. Supposing the driver should see the taxi—as he was certain to do—would he return to inform Benelli? If he were an associate of the murderer's, as seemed likely, he would be almost sure to do so. All hope of her making any discovery would then be destroyed. She herself might be captured.

She waited breathlessly for the return of the car. But it did not come. Instead, growing gradually fainter in the distance, the sound of a motor-engine was the sweetest music in her ears. It was gone!

She stepped into the road again. It was so dark that she could not see more than a few feet ahead. A hush lay over everything. The stillness, indeed, was so intense that she could hear her heart beating.

Suddenly fear came. It struck her so swiftly that she might have been dealt an actual physical blow. She knew the truth—and the truth was horrible. She was alone, and perhaps within striking-distance was the man who had once attempted to kill her and who would surely try again. Although Grainger had been so positive, it seemed unlikely that Benelli, a man whose nerves would be strung up to the highest pitch of tension, would not be aware he was being followed.

He must have set a trap for her, and out of this pitch-blackness he would come leaping in a moment, his eyes blazing with hate, and a knife—yes, a knife, for that would make no sound—gripped tightly in his hand. Something tremendous would happen that night, her consciousness said—would that something be her own death?

In the thraldom of that devastating terror, when eyes seemed to be peering at her from every side, when every second was packed with its own separate dread, she was tempted to turn away and run as fast as her legs would carry her back to the taxi. This blackness would envelop her if she stayed. Creatures like Benelli liked a jungle in which to kill. . . .

With every nerve taut, she fought her fear—fought it, and, after a while, mastered it. She was still afraid, but she no longer allowed it to be her overlord.

And now, as though to give her reassurance and encouragement in the battle, from somewhere to the left a light showed. At first she thought it might be a star, but then quickly realized that it hung too low. It must belong to a house—a lighted window.

The house to which Benelli had gone?

It was wonderful what strength the sight of the light gave her. It might have been a lamp set to guide her home. Like a child whose night-fears disappear at the first glimpse of dawn, she gained confidence. If the devil sends darkness into the world, God sends light.

She went forward as quickly as the uneven road would allow. The sharp flints hurt her feet, and the mud which lay in the sunken surfaces wetted her stockings. For all the protection her thin evening-shoes gave, she might have been walking barefoot.

After about forty yards, there was a wide gap in the hedge on the left-hand side. This proved to be a lane down which she turned, the light still acting as a lodestar.

Another fifty yards and she rested, leaning her arms against a long wooden gate. She had arrived at her destination.

The house, so well as she was able to see, was long and rambling. It had two stories and a large loft or attic. It was from this that the light came. It shone upwards and not outwards.

Surrounding the house were grounds—of a sort. They appeared neglected and overrun with rank growths. From the gate there stretched a path which led up to the entrance.

This was bordered on the left by an unkempt, untrimmed hedge of privet.

There was no doubt this was the house to which Benelli had come. Instinct told her so. But now that she had arrived, what was she to do?

She must get inside the place. It was impossible to guess why Benelli and those for whom he worked had chosen such an isolated and out-of-the-way meeting-place, unless it was through a sense of greater security; but it was sufficient that she had been fortunate enough to discover it.

For her to be found loitering there would, however, be fatal—fatal in a very real sense. For what she had done, her life was already forfeit—these men had placed a price on her head. She must not run any unnecessary risk.

They might have placed a guard—what more likely? Perhaps even now she was being watched. The thought made her start to move away. In the stillness the creaking of the gate as she unlatched it would probably be heard inside the house. She must find another way.

Turning to the left as she walked down the uneven slope leading from the lane, she discovered that the grounds were sheltered from the lane by a wall, above which rose the branches of a row of trees. This must give her entrance.

Going to the extreme end, she climbed the wall—an awkward yet not difficult task—and lowered herself gently on the other side.

Then cautiously she advanced towards the house.

Holiday closed his eyes.

The sight of these three people was offensive to him. He hated them all in different ways, and he wanted to shut them out of his vision. Naturally a fastidious man, he was disgusted with his surroundings and, next to freedom, he longed for nothing so much as sleep. Sleep would bring forgetfulness.

Stadenfeld, that master of monologue, was speaking again.

"You did not think of bringing your cheque-book, perhaps, Holiday? No, of course not. But that defect can easily be remedied: your right hand shall be untied and you will write a note to your man asking him to give the bearer your cheque-book."

"Go to hell!" rejoined the prisoner wearily. "You stopped being humorous some time ago."

The woman Lulu laughed.

"If you leave it to me, I'll make him write," she said. There was so much covert evil in the words that Holiday opened his eyes again. He saw the speaker's face convulsed, and wondered once more why this woman should nurture such an animosity against him. Then he glanced at Stadenfeld. The latter smiled at Lulu Chartres as a parent smiles at a child whom he wishes to humour.

"You will be setting up as a rival to the worthy doctor soon, Lulu," he remarked. "But there is no need to go in for such extreme measures—yet. I will guarantee to get a cheque-book—and a new one—from our friend's banker

to-morrow. It is after we have it that—well, the persuasive methods of you and the doctor will come in useful."

"You are too soft," complained the woman.

"Let us say, rather, that I am hungry, and that I pine for the delights of Pozanni's," was the unruffled comment. "Doctor," he added, "I leave the—er—patient in your charge. You will not release him on any account whatever—understand?—and you will give him only such food and drink as will be sufficient to keep him alive."

"Charming fellow!" remarked the prisoner.

"You will think so before long," replied Stadenfeld, giving the helpless man a kick with the toe of an elegant shoe. "But do not bestow your compliments exclusively upon me; I have every reason to believe that before—well, the end—you will have equal praise to give to my colleague here. Bow in anticipation, doctor."

The pallid-faced man smirked in disgusting fashion.

"One can but do one's best," he said sickeningly.

Stadenfeld waved a manicured hand.

"And now I am afraid I must tear myself away. This, in case you should have any curiosity on the point, Holiday, is a charming rural retreat. It has many advantages to a medical man like my friend, who is engaged in scientific research. On the other hand, it does not provide the cookery to which I have grown accustomed. Miss Chartres will also return with me; but in the event of you finding the company of the doctor pall, I may say that we are expecting any minute a gentleman whom you have previously encountered, and who will doubtless derive considerable pleasure in meet-

ing you again." He turned to the man he called "doctor." "Once Benelli reports here, you will tell him to wait until he receives further instructions from me. Is that quite clear?"

"Quite."

"He will be able to relieve you in looking after the patient."

"Quite." In devilish mockery, the speaker's smile outdid Stadenfeld's.

"And now I must really get away. Come along, Lulu."

It seemed that the woman was reluctant to leave. The manner in which she looked at the prisoner would have struck Holiday as being absurdly melodramatic, if he had not become convinced that, for some reason which he utterly failed to understand, she hated him intensely. But with a final malevolent look, she followed Stadenfeld out of the room.

"You had better come and help me with the car, Merritt," said Stadenfeld from the other side of the door; "your confounded garage is so full of corners, I'm always bumping myself. Holiday will be all right until you return."

"Certainly."

He was alone.

The knowledge did not bring any relief. Benelli was coming there. Benelli. . . . The man whose neck he had done his best to break when he hurled him from the Avignon hotel window a few nights before. Benelli! And he was expected any minute. . . .

Whilst Holiday would have admitted he was afraid, his primary emotion was one of passionate regret. He did not

mind so much being pitch-forked again into this melodrama; what he took objection to was not having a reasonable chance. With his hands free, he would have stood up to the whole boiling and risked his neck with pleasure. His ways had been cast in pleasant places up till now; it would not do him any harm to see the other side of life—a side which, apart from reading about it in the newspapers, he had scarcely known existed. No; it was not the danger he troubled about. That didn't worry him; all he wanted was a chance.

And the worst of it was, there was no prospect of escape. He could scarcely move, let alone put up any resistance. These swine had him absolutely at their mercy. Torture—and then death! It was a pleasant prospect. If Stadenfeld thought, however, that he was going to force money out of him, he would find he was imagining a very vain thing. He'd like to see old Hartley's face when the fat crook went into the bank and calmly demanded a cheque-book.

What was Stadenfeld's game? What scheme was he working out with the assistance of (1) a woman, whose figure and methods strongly suggested Hollywood; (2) a supposed doctor, who might himself have stepped out of a stage-play; and (3) a dago killer, whose very presence was a contamination? There were possibly others in the cast, but these were sufficient to be going on with.

It seemed silly to be at the point of dying when there was so much in life worth living for. But of course, he reassured himself the next minute, he was not going to die—no dashed fear. Die! If those crooks thought . . . and then

he found himself wondering what exactly Benelli the killer would say when he saw him lying there powerless.

He heard a car being driven away from what he imagined was the back of the house, and after a couple of minutes the pallid-faced man entered the room. He brought a chair with him. The first thing this gaoler did was to produce a revolver from his pocket and place it on the ground by his side when he sat down.

"Scarcely necessary, I think," Holiday remarked.

"I beg to think differently," was the suave reply.

The man then took what looked like a snuff-box out of a pocket, opened it, placed some whitish powder on the back of one hand and sniffed this eagerly.

"Physician, heal thyself!" said Holiday. "Is that a stimulant for your nerves? You're a mighty fine crook!"

"That was cocaine." The man stared at him with eyes which were like a snake's. "I always prepare for an operation by taking a mild dose."

"Somebody'll be operating on you before long," was the comment, "and that somebody'll be an undertaker. You're the first dope-fiend I've met, and I hope you'll be the last. I don't know which is the more unpleasant sight—you or Stadenfeld."

The word "operation" had made Holiday become reckless. This man, with his cold, crafty eyes and deathly pale face, was to be feared. There was no doubt about that. Seeing the other sniffing that potent drug had been the final straw. He had to have an outburst.

"You will please be civil," replied the man. He said the

words with a sibilant intonation like a Chinaman. "Need I remind you of the fact that you are entirely at my mercy?"

"But not to kill—I'm far too valuable to be killed." An ironic fact, and yet, with those reptilian eyes on him, a reassuring one.

Before the other could reply, the sound of a knock came to them from below.

"That is a gentleman named Benelli," announced Merritt; "he is likely to listen to even less nonsense than myself. You must excuse me."

He turned and walked out of the room.

When he was alone, Holiday strained at his bonds like a madman. The revolver Merritt had left mocked him. If he could get free. . . .

But he had been secured tightly; the only result of his attempts was to convince him of the uselessness of further efforts.

Just as despair seized him afresh, a sound from above made him look up.

What he saw made him imagine at first that he was dreaming.

From the skylight a pair of silk-clad legs were dangling.

CHAPTER XVI

TOUCH AND GO

Holiday continued to stare. Of all the astonishing events that had occurred that night, this seemed the most remarkable.

They were shapely legs—beautifully moulded legs. They belonged to—a woman.

But what could a woman—any woman—be doing on the roof of this sinister house?

He remained spellbound.

The legs drooped lower. The woman, whoever she might be, was coming into the room. Now he could see her body. She was lowering herself cautiously. Then she dropped, alighting on the chair, making scarcely a sound as she did so.

"You!" The ejaculation broke from him involuntarily. The girl who had dropped from the skylight was the girl of the Monte Carlo express.

Beyond a lowly uttered "Oh!" as she noticed his plight, no reply was made by her. Instead, she became practical, stooping and working feverishly at the ropes which kept him a prisoner.

"You must get away from here—quickly—the man Benelli is downstairs," he told her hurriedly.

Her answer astounded him.

"It was Benelli who brought me here—I saw him watching outside your house in Mount Street to-night and followed him."

"But . . . he may be up here any moment." The throb of his voice was not caused exclusively by that unnerving anxiety; her face was but a foot away from his. How flawless was her skin, how deeply brown were her eyes, how fragrant her hair! . . . He was a fool to notice these things, and yet, at the moment, they assumed such a significance they swamped every other consideration—yes, even the thought of her deadly peril.

"Wait until I have done this," she replied. That, and nothing more. She struggled more desperately with the ropes, broke a nail so that the blood came, and finally got Holiday's wrists free.

"Can you manage the rest whilst I watch the door?" she asked.

He nodded, being bereft of speech. Astonishment kept him dumb. Had a spirit appeared, he could not have been more surprised. This house, Stadenfeld had said, was in the country; from where, then, could this girl, clad in an evening-frock, with silk stockings and dainty shoes, have materialized? She had obviously descended from the roof; but before that? How had she got on to the roof? Then he recalled her explanation. She had seen Benelli in Mount Street and had followed him. But even that did not rob the circumstance of its mystery and magic.

At last he was free. He rose awkwardly to his feet and staggered. Weakness made him giddy.

"Are you all right? Did they ill-treat you?" She was standing by the door. A revolver was in each hand. One looked a toy, but the other Holiday recognized as the weapon which Merritt had left behind him.

"A few hints were given," he replied, "something for me to look forward to. There's a man named Merritt here. They call him 'doctor.' He was preparing me—by making some references to an 'operation.'" All the time he was speaking, he had the impression he must be talking to himself; it was scarcely possible to believe that Valerie Insall was present in the flesh.

"Has Stadenfeld been here?" she asked.

"Yes—and a charming creature he calls 'Lulu.' For some mysterious cause, this lady doesn't like me. It's absurd, but there you are. It was through her I got into this mess—but that's too long a story now." He paused. "Hadn't you better give me one of those revolvers? There are only two men downstairs so far as I know—Merritt and Benelli—and I'm not a bit particular with whom I settle first."

Still staggering slightly, he walked towards the door.

But she motioned him back.

"No," she declared, in a voice that was not quite steady. "I have been wonderfully fortunate to-night—we must not presume upon that luck. You are weak—we cannot fight these men; the most we can do is to escape from them."

"How?" asked Holiday.

Valerie Insall pointed upwards.

"The way I came," she said.

In an untidy sitting-room downstairs, Benelli was gulping the whisky-and-soda which Merritt had poured out at the other's peremptory command.

"Confound you for living in such a place as this," the visitor said belligerently. "I have been wandering about for the last quarter of an hour trying to find it. Graves said when I got out of the car that I should have no difficulty, but I had to cross fields and ditches . . . here, another drink!"

Merritt, who had been before the public eye through the medium of the newspapers a couple of years previously, when the Medical Council ordered his name to be deleted from the Register, complied without immediate comment. He did not like Benelli—few indeed enjoyed that privilege—but he was not a man to lose his temper precipitately. He had learnt his lesson in that respect. A recent year in prison had given him ample opportunity for reflection.

"You must have kept straight on instead of turning down the lane on the left," he replied conciliatorily. "However, the main thing is that you have arrived."

"In a nice mess," growled the Italian, looking at his filthy boots and bespattered trousers. "Has Stadenfeld come yet? Why he wanted to see me out here instead of in London I can't imagine."

Merritt smiled in his thin-lipped fashion.

"Stadenfeld has been, and gone," he replied. "Wait," he added, as another explosion threatened; "he was hungry and said he had to get back to Pozanni's. But you will find someone here more interesting than Stadenfeld."

"Who is it?" Benelli had placed his empty glass on the table before him.

"A man named Holiday."

The Italian rapped out an oath.

"Holiday? That fellow! Why, I was studying his house only an hour ago, wondering which was the best way to get in. I have sworn to kill him—he did his best to break my back a week ago at Avignon. . . . But you know nothing of that——" He broke off abruptly. "And I do not intend to tell you," was the unceremonious conclusion.

"It is no concern of mine, as you say," remarked Merritt, "but I gathered from what Stadenfeld said, that you would be pleased to have the news. You are to stay here helping me to keep guard over the man until Stadenfeld sends word."

"Where is Holiday now?"

"In the loft. Lulu chose it because it was the most uncomfortable place in the house."

Benelli's dark, saturnine face split into a brief smile.

"Lulu is like that," he agreed. "How did they catch him?"

"I will tell you later. Although the man is helpless—bound hand and foot—I do not like to leave him too long. I have been put in charge; Stadenfeld holds me responsible. And you know what Stadenfeld is like if anything goes wrong."

Benelli nodded.

"Yes—but he had better not try any of his tricks off on me." Then with a change of manner: "Hurry up and show

the way—I am anxious to see this Mr. Holiday. I hope you haven't told him I was coming?"

"I did—and he went white," replied Merritt, knowing that would please the other.

He was right. Benelli grinned. So might a wolf have shown its fangs.

"I hear them walking about," said Valerie. "We must be quick—now they are on the stairs. . . ."

Holiday was holding his hands down preparatory to pulling her up to the roof on which his body was already stretched. In the crisis, it was the girl's mind that had worked more quickly. She had assumed control of the situation; had taken command.

"Can you get on to the roof and then help me up?" she had said.

"But supposing they came?" and he pointed to the door.

"We must chance that—if they do, I shall shoot," she said determinedly.

It seemed impossible to argue with her. Even the tremendous craving for satisfaction which had possessed him a few moments before disappeared. He felt compelled to obey.

An almost miraculously fit man, he soon found his strength returning. He stood on the chair and jumped upwards so that his hands caught the sides of the skylight.

Then came the real test. With his feet dangling in space, Holiday had to draw himself up like a gymnast. The strain on his wrists and arms was terrific. But he accomplished it.

And now he was holding out his hands to draw Valerie to safety.

She surrendered herself to him. The eight-stone of her became a light weight; very soon she had joined him on the roof.

"This must be shut," she said, and lowered the skylight. As she did so, they could see two men walking into the room.

Holiday recognized the second man immediately. It was Benelli, and his face was livid.

"You damned fool—he's gone!" he heard the crook snarl, as the latter turned to Merritt.

From close by, came the sound of a quiet laugh.

"While they quarrel we get away," said Valerie. "There is a great deal in this house I should like to investigate, but I am afraid that must wait. I can always come back."

"You're never coming back here!" Holiday said.

"Why not, please?" She had turned towards him, and although they were now out of range of the light, he could see her lips smiling.

"Because I shall forbid you to. What do you mean by risking your life like this?" he demanded angrily. Then came remembrance, and he added: "Of course, it's no business of mine—and I am deeply grateful; I want you to know that."

"Suppose we defer the conversation until afterwards?" was the answer. "We're not by any means out of the wood yet."

The sound of curses from below followed them as they

slid down the sloping roof until they reached a foot-wide parapet.

Valerie pointed.

"Here is the stack-pipe I climbed up—will you go first, or shall I?"

"You," he replied. "I'm expecting to see visitors any minute."

The words were scarcely uttered before a face showed itself from above.

"Get to cover!" shouted Holiday, and fired. There was the tinkling of broken glass, and the face—which certainly had looked like Benelli's—disappeared.

"I'm afraid it's not much good hoping that I've killed him," said Holiday; "that fellow's luck with regard to living would make any cat jealous."

The expected reply did not come, the girl had vanished. Looking over the side of the parapet, he saw her descending the stack-pipe with a rapidity that was astonishing. She might have been a tomboy clambering over a fence after a marauding expedition upon a farmer's orchard.

Pushing the revolver back into his coat-pocket, Holiday followed suit. He was prepared to admit that his descent was neither as rapid nor as graceful as his companion's. Not until he was half-way down at any rate—then he lost his grip and hurtled through space for the remainder of the journey, landing with a heavy thud.

"Are you hurt?" he was asked.

He looked up into the face which even in the darkness looked enchanting.

"I'm not really up to this game yet," he said, rising; "it's new to me. I shall have to take a few lessons. As you are evidently an expert, perhaps I can prevail upon you to give me the necessary tuition."

She laughed softly.

"I left a theatre-cloak somewhere near here, but I don't know if it would be wise to try to find it. The first thing is to get away."

"True, dear Lady of the Night. I admit that. And yet—excuse my obstinacy—it seems rather a pity. You want to rummage through the house for some purpose which I'm too well-mannered to inquire into, whilst I passionately want to ascertain whether Benelli is really and truly dead. Although I shot at him a few moments ago, it is almost too much to hope that I did any material damage. His face vanished, it is true, but that is scarcely convincing evidence. What do you think?"

"What I think," replied the girl, "is that they will be coming out of the house to search for you any minute. And whilst I agree that both these men deserve death, yet it would lead you into all sorts of fresh difficulties if you did kill them now. If we could capture them, yes, but—there is the back-door," she added quickly, pointing to the left. "Standing here, we are in the direct line of their fire." She caught hold of his arm and led him away.

They had reached the edge of the grounds when a door was heard to open.

"Here they are," she whispered; "stoop."

"Stoop it is," he replied, obeying the command. "I hope

you have your compass with you. If only the stars were out——"

A low chuckle of laughter told him she had heard.

Hand in hand they rushed ahead. Suddenly Holiday felt himself falling into space again. With the breath knocked out of his body, he attempted to rise.

"There was a dip in the ground," explained the girl. "I should have told you."

"All I hope is friend Benelli finds it—and I hear him coming," was the reply. "Do you know the way out of this jungle?"

"Yes—there is a wall——"

"Then you push on, and I will follow."

"I don't like to do that."

"But you must. Don't you see, if I can stop Benelli, you will be safe. Quickly!" he urged. He did not add that, owing to the pain in an ankle, he was afraid he could not move another step.

"I will come back," whispered the girl. And then he was alone. She had swiftly left his side.

He took stock of his surroundings. To his left was a large bank; on the right was the deep slope down which he had fallen when, owing to the unexpected dip in the ground, he had overbalanced. He crawled painfully round to the back of this bank and waited.

He was surprised, and yet glad, that the girl had gone. Although she had a revolver—if that toy he had seen in her hand could be called a revolver—yet her presence would have complicated matters. He wanted to meet Benelli face

to face—and alone. If that doctor fellow also showed up he would wing him first before devoting himself to the dago. Strong as was the wish to deal with Merritt, he felt, all things considered, that his first duty was to Benelli.

He would break the fellow's neck without any mistake this time, if he could only get his hands on him.

The waiting proved unsettling, and when neither foe appeared, Holiday began to feel something of a fool. But for his gammy ankle—he couldn't tell whether he had broken a bone or merely sprained it; it certainly hurt like the devil—he would have emerged from his hiding-place and gone towards the house. As it was, being practically powerless to move, he perforce had to remain where he was.

How long that eerie silence remained unbroken he did not know, but it seemed an eternity. Then, from behind, came a sound so slight it might have been made by a passing night-wind.

Instantly Holiday stiffened, half-turned—and put up a hand to catch the arm at the end of which was a swiftly descending knife.

Benelli—for the attacker was the dago—spat out an oath. He was not able to spare any further breath after that, for the fight was on.

Neither knew mercy, for both sought to kill. It seemed to Holiday, as he endeavoured to bring his fingers to the other's throat, that this human stoat must have been an enemy of his in a previous incarnation. Perhaps from the beginning of time they had been foes—otherwise, why should he have such a consuming hatred of the man? This

animosity was so intense that he entirely forgot the pain in his ankle as he strove for the mastery.

Benelli had lost his knife—this had flown from his hand when Holiday had given his wrist such a wrench—and, rendered desperate by the knowledge, he put all he had into one tremendous effort to overcome the other.

But the man he had twice attempted to kill seemed to have a strength that was overwhelming. Struggling like a lunatic for foothold, he was being pressed relentlessly backwards, and finally collapsed. With a hoarse cry—the last he felt he would ever utter—he attempted to pull his enemy's legs from under him in a final unavailing effort to establish something like equality.

As for Holiday, no joy he had ever experienced could equal the satisfaction he felt. He was about to commit murder—he was shortly to squeeze the life out of a living creature—and his emotion was one of transcendent gladness.

"You've got just one more minute to live, Benelli," he announced.

As the man's name left his lips, he sank forward. A blow that had descended from the darkness at the back paralysed his brain and robbed him of all power.

In the moment of triumph, he had failed.

CHAPTER XVII

INTERLUDE

HOLIDAY opened his eyes slowly. So many strange things were happening to him that he was prepared for anything—anything but this reality. Valerie Insall was bending over him and looking anxiously into his face. At the same moment, he became conscious that he was in a car and that it was being driven at a rapid pace.

"Benelli?" he asked.

"He got away," she replied.

"Seems to be a useful habit of his," commented Holiday. "I had the blighter set—another minute, and I really believe I should have joined the list of murderers who have acted for the best, when someone crept behind and gave me the knock-out on the back of the head. Merritt, I presume?"

"No doubt. Poor boy. . . ." She did not add anything more, although Holiday felt he would have been content to remain perfectly still and listen for quite a considerable time. "It was Grainger who saved you," she resumed, after a pause.

"Grainger?" He attempted to sit up and failed. "Grainger—the name's quite new. Friend or foe? But if he rescued me, he is presumably a friend." How that infernal lump on the back of his head throbbed! Every jolt of the car gave

him a particularly juicy assortment of distilled agonies.

"A friend indeed!" she replied. "He is a taxi-driver—this is his cab."

"This galumphing hearse! I thought I detected an ancient earth-like smell."

"Please don't laugh!" Valerie reprimanded. "Later on I intend to introduce you to Grainger—George Grainger, to give him his full name—and I am sure you will like him."

"I'm certain I shall. But exactly where did our gracious, well-beloved George flicker into this sensational movie?"

"I will tell you—but first, how is the head?"

"The head is behaving itself as well as can be expected in the somewhat unusual circumstances. As a matter of honest fact, it's giving a most realistic imitation of one of those pneumatic electric drills digging its way into concrete, but——"

"I'm terribly sorry." The speaker's eyes were so tender that the man at whom they were directed felt it would be the beginning of madness if he continued to look at them.

"But, as I was about to remark," he said, "you were going to tell me about George."

She nodded.

"By a most wonderful piece of luck, he happened to be the taxi-driver I hailed when I saw Benelli get into a car at the Mount Street end of Park Lane to-night. That he was intelligent I discovered at once, because when I said 'Follow that car and don't let it out of your sight,' he started off as though he had been spending all his life doing nothing else."

"Sound fellow. He'll probably end up as Minister of Transport in the next Labour Government."

"And then," continued Valerie, "when I got out of the taxi near that house, he wanted to come along and lend a hand. He said he didn't think it right that I should be left alone. He imagined that I was going to run into some sort of danger——"

"And you weren't," interrupted the listener in a tone of mild sarcasm. "Oh, no, not a bit of it! I suppose it's become such a habit now that you are not able to break yourself?"

"I'm afraid it has," she replied, with a wry smile. "I dare say you wondered why I left you back in that garden?" Then, without pausing for a reply: "The fact was that Grainger had promised to wait to drive me back to the West End—of course, I had no idea then that you were anywhere in the vicinity—and so I ran off and fetched him. He was only too glad to come—his face when he understood there was a chance of fighting to be done was a study—but he made so much noise getting over the wall, that both Benelli and Merritt must have become scared. We didn't see anything of them, at all events."

"They retired in masterly order to the house, no doubt."

"Perhaps. The main thing was that we found you and brought you away safely."

"For which I am very much obliged. At the same time, I think it was rather a pity that I was there at all."

"Why?"

"Because if I hadn't been, you might have taken the opportunity—having the invaluable assistance of George

Grainger, *alias* Strong-i'-th'-arm—of undertaking those investigations into the house you spoke of."

"Getting you safely away was far more important. Besides, I shall have another opportunity."

"You may not."

"Why do you say that?"

"Well," replied the rescued one, wincing as George, the well-beloved, ran into a deep rut, causing his chariot to lurch like a drunken reveller, "I give friend Stadenfeld credit for a rather high percentage of brain-power. Now that the bird has flown—the bird being your very humble servant—he will know that the whereabouts of this rural retreat of his has been located; and I presume he will take certain precautions. I don't know how valuable the property is, but I shouldn't be surprised to read of a fire or an explosion in this portion of the globe quite soon."

"There will be other opportunities, even so."

Holiday would have liked to say a great deal in reply to this—but what was the use? Danger seemed the very breath of life to this astonishing girl. And, as a certain recollection carrying a particular poignancy in its tail, flashed across his mind, he realized he had no right to attempt to argue with her. She had saved his life that night, it was true—but she belonged to another man. That applied the closure very effectively.

"I have told Grainger to drive you back to Mount Street," his companion remarked. By this time they had reached Baker Street Station, Holiday noticed by a look through the window.

"A very sound scheme," he replied; "it will give me the opportunity of offering you some supper."

She shook her head.

"I couldn't allow anyone to see me in this condition, I am too shocking for anything. A bath, then a change, and then——"

"I said it first: some supper."

"No, bed," she replied.

"In which case, I shall insist upon George the Good driving first to your house."

"We mustn't quarrel," she retorted. "Grainger has already received his instructions, and these cannot be countermanded. You must promise me to call in a doctor as soon as possible and let him examine your head," she added.

"My man is as good as any doctor—better than the average, I should say. He's used to me coming home rather the worse for wear through polo."

"All the same, I should prefer you to have a doctor. Your servant could carry out any orders, of course."

"Very well, Miss Insall."

"You know my name?" Her surprise seemed genuine.

"I seem to have heard it somewhere," he replied flippantly. "Can we imagine ourselves properly introduced by this time?"

"I hope so," she replied, and then, No. 221 Mount Street having been reached, the taxi stopped.

"So you're Grainger," said Holiday, when the burly driver opened the door.

"That's me, sir—and I 'ope as 'ow you ain't none the worse for that knock on the nut?"

"Call round to-morrow morning—or to-night after taking this lady home, if you can spare the time, and you shall see for yourself," was the answer.

"Very good, sir. And you can trust me to see that this lydy gets to 'ome sweet 'ome all right."

Holiday turned to the girl.

"I leave you in the hands of a far more trustworthy person," he said, maintaining the note of flippancy with which he had considered it expedient that he should arm himself that night. "As for my poor life, you, having saved it, can henceforth have any claim on the thing that you may wish."

"I promise not to press that claim unduly, Mr. Holiday—and don't forget that I owed you a tremendous debt. Suppose we now call it quits?"

"As you will, dear lady," he answered, and standing with uplifted hat, watched her being driven away. The night air beat upon the bump of malevolence at the back of his head, but did nothing to assuage the pain he felt; for this discomfort was now mental as well as physical.

Somers was called and told part of the truth. After that he was allowed to examine the damage.

"A pretty nasty bump, sir," he assessed, "but I don't think you will need a doctor—I can do all that's necessary."

"All right, I imagined you could. Now get busy. Afterwards, I'll have some food."

"I have been brought into this affair against my will, Somers," he explained, when the wound had been dressed and the meal was over, "but now that I'm in, I'm going to stay in. I made one attempt to break away, as you know, but that being unsuccessful, I don't propose to do anything more in the matter. Events must now take their course. That is not to say that you mustn't keep your wits about you for prowlers on the stairs and things like that."

"Quite so, sir. May I say something?"

"Certainly."

"If you could see your way clear to including me in your next expedition, I should feel very much obliged."

Holiday laughed.

"But I've told you these men do not stop at murder, Somers."

The ex-lancer shuffled his feet.

"That's what gives the spice to it, sir, if I may put it that way."

"All right," was the reply, "consider yourself forthwith enrolled in the B.E.F."

"B.E.F., sir?"

"Benelli Expeditionary Force, man—and now mix yourself a drink!"

CHAPTER XVIII

INTRODUCING A VERY IMPORTANT CHARACTER

Like his surroundings, this man was very elegant. That arbiter of fashion and judge of good form, the founder of the Bachelors' Club, would have delighted in Hector Pandervell. In this respect the worthy Quaker, now gathered to his fathers, was not alone: Hector Pandervell was one of the most popular men in Society, and London hostesses delighted to do him honour. Wherever the so-called *élite* were gathered, there one could depend upon seeing this present-day descendant of the old-style exquisite. Pandervell, with his lithe figure belying his years, his immaculate clothes, his monocle, his charming manners, and his general fastidiousness that reminded his critics—and he had critics, in common with every other personality—of a sleek, disdainful cat, was inalienably associated with first-nights, garden-parties given by duchesses, at-homes of famous political hostesses; he could be seen leaning gracefully over the chair of the Countess of C—— in her box at Covent Garden, whilst at the fashionable race-meetings women with honoured and illustrious names struggled to be his companion. Pandervell was one of the most familiar of all the figures whom the picture Press had rendered famous to the groundlings; he

adorned the distinguished pages of the *Chattler* week by week; when he was not amongst those present, there seemed something missing from the pictorial records of that high-class journal.

Hector Pandervell, indeed, occupied a unique position in the life and movement of modern London. He was rich, fashionable, popular—and a crook. The fact that no one realized how he made his money must be put down to his cleverness. For he had brains. Without brains he would not have attained his present position.

Just now he was in his rooms in Albany—those same oak-panelled chambers rendered for ever memorable by the minute description a celebrated writer had given of them in his novel, *The Jaded Gentleman*. His country house at Dorking was closed for the moment. Surrounded by such refined luxury, the darling of the "best people"—how Thackeray would have revelled in him!—might have been expected to be at his ease. Instead, he was striding up and down the room like a tiger that has recently had its tail pulled. His thin, aristocratic, usually ivory-tinted face was flushed. The thin lips curled back over the teeth which had been placed in that supercilious mouth by the most expensive dentist in Wimpole Street.

"You seem to be making a speciality of blunders, Stadenfeld," he said bitterly.

"Nothing to do with me," replied the visitor. "I left Merritt in charge. He had Benelli to help him. If two armed men cannot look after one who is helpless——"

There was a sharp interruption.

"On the contrary, it was everything to do with you. I made you responsible. Instead, you went off, on your own confession, to eat a supper which I have no doubt whatever you did not require. As a consequence, not only did the man Holiday escape, but attention has been drawn to a house which I particularly wanted to keep secret. You know the reason yourself."

Stadenfeld nodded.

"Yes," he agreed, "I know the reason. It is unfortunate, but at the same time, I must refuse to take the blame. If two men cannot——"

Again he was interrupted.

"I refuse to listen to excuses. The only factor by which I allow myself to be influenced is results. Results are the only things in life worth considering. Any fool can fail. Damage has been done; we must cover the loss as much as possible. But before I go into that, I want to know if you really think that the girl Insall was concerned in Holiday's escape?"

"Merritt said something about seeing someone wearing woman's clothes in the garden last night. But whoever got Holiday out of that attic, must have shown courage and resource. It does not strike me as very likely for a girl to be able to climb up the side of a house."

"If you have one weakness, apart from your abnormal liking for food, Stadenfeld," was the retort, "it is the tendency to underrate your opponents. We know sufficient of Valerie Insall to realize that she is a person of determination. I learned that through Kuropatin. Have you forgotten what he wrote?"

"All the more reason why she must be—suppressed."

Pandervell, sitting down, took a cigarette from a jade case.

"I rather object to killing a woman," he said gently, "but there are exceptions, of course, to every rule. No," he continued, looking up at the other man with a quizzical smile, "I will not ask you to see to it, Stadenfeld—you promised to see to Holiday—and with what result?"

"I have already refused to take the blame for that," replied the criticized man sullenly.

"In your own mind," came the correction. "No, I am afraid I must find some other means. If I might venture to make another comment, Stadenfeld, it is that you are a little lacking in finesse. I cannot forget," the speaker added, his voice rising, "that we might have made a fortune out of Holiday and that he is now free to inform his friends in the Secret Service of his adventure last night. You had better go, Stadenfeld; I am expecting a visitor. The back entrance, if you don't mind."

The other frowned, but obeyed the command—it was nothing less—without remonstrance.

During the ten minutes that elapsed before his man announced the arrival of the expected caller, Pandervell was apparently asleep. Putting aside the cigarette he had recently lit, he leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes. This was his customary attitude when tackling a problem. And although the solution seemed easy on the surface, the Insall girl represented a very important problem indeed.

The manservant who entered, mentioned a very well-known name.

The next moment a woman of late middle-age swept into the room in a very tempest of haste.

"Hector," she said, by way of greeting, "I must have some to-day."

Pandervell regarded her curiously. A student of human nature, this woman still interested him, although she had long since become his slave. Judged by the smile on his lips he found amusement in his visitor's clamant eagerness—amusement that was edged with a very fine and delicate cruelty.

"For one to want, does not necessarily follow that one can have," he replied. The tone was cynical.

The woman stepped forward. Her hawklike face—she was known as the ugliest woman in London—was crimson.

"I tell you I am desperate, Hector!" she said in a voice which, always naturally unpleasant, desire now made coarsely harsh.

He affected to be moved.

"Which is it this time," he inquired, "money—or the stuff?"

"Both. Oh, God! how it hurts to have to come pleading to you like this!" She raised her hands and held them over her face.

The words had no effect upon the man. It was part of his noxious profession to deal with women who professed, sincerely or otherwise, to be stricken with remorse.

"Why do you keep me waiting?" the caller demanded, dropping her hands. "Haven't I given you full value in the past?" Her roving, agitated glance took in the handsome

furnishings of the room: the costly rugs, the handsome vases and bronzes, the rare prints—all those delights with which a man of wealth, taste, refinement, and discretion surrounds himself.

"And you have been paid." Cynicism had now given way to open brutality. Pandervell could not have shown greater disregard if he had struck her a blow. "You know my business axiom," he continued, as her thin, emaciated-looking body shook with an involuntary shudder; "I am always open to pay a fair price for goods of value."

Her lips parted, to show teeth that had curiously sharpened tops. This smile was so ghastly that it might have been expected to strike pity into the heart of any ordinary watcher. But upon Pandervell, who was her master, it had no effect. The goods which this woman, moving in the highest places, had supplied him from time to time, represented men and women's souls, but to him they were ordinary merchandise.

"Have you anything further to offer me?" he asked. "There is a fairly brisk demand for goods of value just about now."

"I must have five hundred pounds immediately—and some of the stuff," was the reply she gave him.

"You shall have both—once I approve of the goods."

"Don't play with me, Pandervell!" she exploded. "I have nothing to sell . . . he is becoming suspicious . . . oh, no! not of me, but of everyone around him . . . even his private secretaries are complaining."

Pandervell's expression of bleak hostility increased.

"I regret your visit promises then to be wasted," he rejoined.

"You *must* let me have some money," she pleaded afresh. "I don't care what I do."

"In that case, we may be able to arrange something," replied Pandervell. "Do you know a girl named Insall—Valerie Insall?"

The caller shrank back in her chair.

CHAPTER XIX

G. G. MAKES A BET

"Well, 'ere's another thousand a year," said George Grainger.

Somers nodded, after the manner of his kind.

The two, who had made friends after a brief acquaintance, lifted their pint pots in unison. It was a feast of soul as well as a flow of beer.

The scene of the festival was the "Blue Boar." This justly famed hostelry is round the corner from Mount Street. It is permeated by that enchanting but illusive quality which novelists call "atmosphere," and is the house of call for gentlemen's servants, butlers, taxi-drivers, men and women of the half-world, and other interesting characters. One can often see a notorious blackmailer engaged in close converse with a valet at the "Blue Boar." Detectives look in, but are served in silence. The "Blue Boar" does not call itself especially particular, but it draws the line at a "busy." There are limits.

Because he liked to see a bit of life when he was off-duty, Somers had made the "Blue Boar" his favourite house of call. Besides, it was near at hand. George Grainger knew the pub as he knew every other worth-while spot in the whole of the West End.

"Yes, your guv-nor's wot I call a toff," the taxi-driver now announced. "It wasn't much that I did, but d'you know wot 'e slipped me las' night? A tenner—s'elp me if 'e didn't! A tenner! Why, 'e must be abaht the only one left of that class. The others died out wiv the war."

The ex-lancer leaned towards the speaker.

"Can't make out what's come over the boss," he said, lapsing again into the speech he used with his intimates. "Before this happened, all he thought about was gettin' as much sport as possible; now he seems to want to spend all his time tryin' to get killed. Not that there'd be so very much to complain about in that, if only he'd let me come along with him. But all he said last night, was to keep a good look-out for any vermin hangin' about on the stairs. There's a woman in it, of course," Somers added sagely, "although he made no mention of it to me."

G. G. finished his beer in a workmanlike fashion and called for a further supply.

"Wot d'*you* think," he retorted, with a throaty chuckle; "you bet your sweet life there's a woman in it! At least," he corrected himself, "she ain't a woman—she's the finest, sweetest, loveliest, scrumptiousest——"

"'Old 'ard!" expostulated Somers, dropping both h's in his excitement, "if she's all this, where do *I* come in?"

"Wot d'you mean? This girl ain't got nothin' to do with you."

"Oh, hasn't she?" scoffed the ex-lancer. "I know the artful, wheedlin' way of them sort. There was old Colonel Trotter —him that had command of the regiment in 1919. 'E was

got 'old of by one of those too-good-for-'eaven ones, and she soon made it worse than 'ell for him. I don't want the boss to come a cropper like the Colonel."

Grainger shook his head vigorously.

"You needn't worry about this 'ere Miss Insall," he replied, "she's real class—she could marry inter the 'ighest society, and they'd be glad ter 'ave 'er. That's 'ow good she is."

"Well, so long as she don't worry the boss, she can pick who she likes."

G. G. had a twinkle in his eye as he looked at the ex-lancer.

"I don't mind makin' a small bet—anythin' under a quid—that she and your boss is 'itched up all nice and proper within six months—ah, three months. It's more than ordinary 'uman nature can stand, I tell you, ter be wiv that girl and not ter feel you wants ter love 'er."

Somers regarded the speaker dubiously.

"I thought you was married, Grainger."

"So I am, but I've got one of them large, expandin' 'earts. There's nothin' narrer-minded abaht me, I 'ope. This girl's a peach, and there you 'ave it. Wot's more, she saved your guv'nor's life last night—and any man who 'as 'ad 'is life saved by the likes of 'er—well, if 'e ain't looking up the nearest registry offis by this time, 'e ought ter be ashamed of 'issel'!"

So dismal became the prospect which these impassioned words conjured up that Somers groaned.

"I don't like the thought of the boss gettin' married at

all—and that's a fact," he said, by way of explanation. "Him and me get on first rate; we're like two bugs in a rug. He never was one for worryin' about women. But if he is thinkin' of this 'ere Miss Insall, or whatever her name is, he'll soon get over it." Somers tried to make his voice sound confident.

"Goin' ter take my bet?" asked the taxi-driver, grinning.

"Yes—I will."

"That'll mean another quid findin' a good 'ome. But we'll spend it together, mate, celebratin' the nupshools."

It was too much. Somers, finding the taste of good bitter beer becoming sour in his mouth, rose and moodily left the place.

At the precise moment that his servant was listening lugubriously to what that prophet and seer, George Grainger, fondly imagined the fates had in store for him, Gerald Holiday was perusing a letter. His whole attention was engaged.

Dear Mr. Holiday [he read],

So much happened last night that I am afraid I neglected an obvious duty. That was to thank you for the very kind help you gave me on the Riviera express a week ago. There were reasons why I did not get into touch with you before, but I hope you will believe me when I say that I was, and still am, very deeply grateful.

Having performed this duty, may I now make an appeal to you? It is this: Please leave England as soon as possible. Your life is in danger. I deeply regret that you should have

incurred the enmity of these men—who are desperate criminals—through any action on my part, and to relieve my anxiety, I should be glad if you would take my advice and leave London. There is the chance that if they know you have gone out of the country they will not trouble you in the future.

Please take me seriously over this matter.

Very sincerely yours,

VALERIE INSALL.

P.S.—I think it would be advisable to burn this letter after you have read it.

Having read the communication three times and finding increased dissatisfaction with it after each perusal, Holiday reached for the telephone.

"Mayfair 3279Y."

"Hullo," said a voice which thrilled him.

"This is Holiday," he said.

"Oh, yes." It was as though the girl was endeavouring to make her voice sound casual, but not succeeding.

"I say, I can't do that, you know," he said, plunging at once into the subject.

"You prefer not to take my advice."

"It's not that exactly, but—oh, well, talking over the telephone is so difficult . . . won't you let me see you somewhere?" He waited eagerly for her reply, and when it came he was filled with rage.

"No—I am sorry."

"But why not?" he demanded.

"There are reasons against it." He heard what he imagined to be an intake of breath before she spoke.

"That's all rot, of course." Then, conquering himself, he continued: "But I am afraid I cannot leave London just now, it would upset too many arrangements. Good-bye, Miss Insall."

A pause, during which he imagined she must have quietly replaced the receiver.

Then came the quietly-spoken answer.

"Good-bye, Mr. Holiday."

He hung up the receiver civilly, but then exploded. What was the matter with the girl? What kind of spineless creature did she imagine he was, anyway? Leave London when Benelli and Stadenfeld, not to mention the wormlike Merritt, were still in the vicinity? Oh, dear no! Thugs they might be, but they had given him quite a new zest in existence, and he wasn't to be deprived of the excitement.

Somers, entering, looked at him gloomily.

"A Mr. Bishop has called, sir," he announced.

"Show him in," was the quick reply.

The Secret Service man flashed his host a whimsical smile as they shook hands.

"Still alive, I notice," he remarked.

"Yes, you ghoul," replied Holiday, "still alive and developing quite a healthy kick. What's your poison? And what's brought you to my humble roof-tree?"

Bishop's face became serious.

"I want to know if you have seen anything of Traill?" he replied.

"Traill? No. Why?"

"Because he isn't to be found," was the answer.

Holiday stared at the speaker.

"Can't be found?" he repeated. "Why, what's happened to him?"

"That's what I should very much like to know," was Bishop's rejoinder, "and that is why I have looked you up. I thought that perhaps you might be able to tell me something."

Holiday shook his head.

"No, I'm afraid I can't. I haven't seen Traill lately." He did not give the reason. The excuse would have seemed childish and ridiculous. "Tell me what you know," he added. Although he tried to reassure himself by thinking that nothing he could have done would have prevented this tragedy—if tragedy it was—yet the thought of his old friend being dead gave his conscience an uneasy twinge.

"There's precious little to tell," replied Bishop, speaking more slowly and seriously than was his custom. "Traill and I were working on the same job. I'm not prepared to say what this job was, but perhaps after what happened the other night at Taviton Street, you can form some sort of idea yourself. I had made an arrangement with Traill; we were to meet at a certain place last night. He didn't turn up. That in itself was significant; but what gave me the first real feeling that something was wrong, was the fact that he hadn't sent any message. It would take too much time to go fully into details, but you can take it from me that my not receiving any message represented a pretty serious state of

affairs. Then, when I called round at his flat and found that nothing had been seen of him for two whole days, I commenced to think things. There was just a chance that you might have known something."

Holiday lit the pipe he had filled at the beginning of Bishop's remarks.

"I need scarcely point out, I think, that both Traill and you did your best the other night to prevent me knowing anything. I'm sorry, Bishop, but I can't help you—I only wish I could. Peter and I have been good friends, I should hate to think that anything has happened to him."

"I'm afraid it has," returned Bishop gloomily; "these men we are up against don't stick at trifles."

"Don't I know it!" said his host. As Bishop regarded him questioningly, he added: "I've had another proof of that quite recently, but the story can wait; let's concentrate on Traill. At the risk of being turned down a second time, I'm willing to lend a hand if you would like me to."

Bishop raised his glass.

"That's darned decent of you, old man," he said, "and I appreciate it."

"The point is, do you accept it? This bogy-bogy stuff may impress some people, but I don't mind telling you it leaves me cold. What's the point of it all?"

"I'll go as far as I can with you, Holiday—farther than perhaps I ought to go," was the answer. "When Traill and I turned you down, as you put it the other night, it was because we had no alternative. This was a department matter,

and any outsiders—even a sportsman like yourself—were strictly barred. The decision didn't rest with us, you understand—we were merely following out one of the strictest rules of the Service. Get that clearly into your head."

"All right. I'm not such an ass as not to be able to appreciate a point like that," replied the mollified Holiday. Why, in the name of all that was normal and natural, hadn't Traill himself said this?

"There are all sorts of complications in the business," continued Bishop, "as I believe I've hinted to you before."

"One minute," broke in Holiday. "Is Miss Insall a member of the Secret Service?"

Bishop hesitated a moment before he answered.

"No, she isn't," he said finally.

Holiday struck a match with angry vigour.

"Then why on earth are you allowing her to run the terrible risks she is doing?"

"If I told you that, Holiday, I should be breaking a confidence. Let me assure you on one point, however. Both Traill and I have tried repeatedly to get her to give up this work. She has what she considers a vitally important reason for continuing—and there you are."

"Will nothing persuade her?"

"Nothing. Yes, there's one thing that would make her stop—the rounding up of the dirty hound for whom Stadenfeld and his gang work. When she has done that—and she has sworn to devote the rest of her life to the job if need be—

then Valerie Insall will retire from the game. But not before."

"She'll be killed."

"I'm afraid she will," was the answer, "but that doesn't stop her—on the contrary, it gives her a greater zest for the job."

"She must be guarded. The police——"

Bishop smiled.

"The last thing she wants is to have the police mixed up in this business, which she considers an essentially private affair. Forgive me if I appear to lapse into the mysterious again, but I am unable to put it more plainly than that."

"Well, it's beyond me," confessed Holiday; "but it seems ghastly that she should stand the chance of being murdered practically every hour of every day. What are you going to do about Traill?" he asked, anxious to get Valerie Insall out of his thoughts, if only for a brief period.

"I have informed my department. The police have been told something . . . but I'm not expecting much; you see, I know Stadenfeld's methods."

"So do I. Since I saw you last, Bishop, I've had another merry meeting with that overweight joker." He proceeded to tell what had happened two nights previously.

"Edgware," exclaimed the Secret Service man excitedly, when Holiday had come to an end, "why, there's something in the *Star* to-night about a house being blown up at Edgware."

He pulled a copy of the newspaper out of his pocket and handed it to Holiday.

The latter read the arresting headlines on the front page:

STRANGE OCCURRENCE AT EDGWARE
HOUSE COMPLETELY DESTROYED
MYSTERY EXPLOSION

He glanced through the brief report which followed and returned the paper.

"But for me, Miss Insall might have discovered the secrets in that house," he said. "Now the chance is gone. I was going out there myself to-night, as a matter of fact. I did think of it last night, but felt too rotten. That crack on the head . . ." He broke off quickly, to add determinedly: "Bishop, that girl must chuck this business—it's too dangerous. You can see that for yourself."

"Haven't I already admitted it? That crowd would give a great deal to do Traill or myself in—I believe, to be frank, that perhaps they have already done what they wanted with Traill—but they would give a great deal more to get hold of Valerie Insall."

Holiday bit hard on the stem of his pipe. He remembered the appalling risks the girl had run, mainly for his sake, only a comparatively few hours before.

"She must be stopped," he said again.

Bishop shrugged his shoulders.

"She will refuse to listen."

"What about this crook who is above Stadenfeld?" he asked. "Have you any idea who he is?"

"If we had, we should be prepared to use drastic measures. But we have drawn a blank so far. As a matter of fact, the only real success we have had with this crowd so far has been achieved by Valerie Insall—that is one of the reasons, no doubt, why she is so determined to carry on."

"What are they after?" asked Holiday impatiently.

"Something pretty sensational—and therefore important," was the reply. And that was the only answer Bishop could be induced to give.

Finishing his drink, he rose and held out his hand.

"You'll feel inclined to punch my head for what I'm going to say, I have no doubt," he remarked, "but there'll be enough murder and sudden death hanging round, without you getting messed-up. This is the third and final time of asking. I know Traill would say the same if he were here," he added.

"I'm not giving any promises."

"Then you're an obstinate devil. If Traill should turn up, just give me a ring, will you?"

"I'll do that, of course."

It was getting on towards dinner-time. Holiday decided he would have the meal out. He had been indoors for two days on the express instructions of his doctor, and he was feeling the need for some fresh air. A little gaiety might be a tonic.

As he changed, he came to a decision. He would call unexpectedly at Valerie Insall's flat—the address was printed

at the top of the letter she had sent him—and whether she liked it or not, carry her off to dinner. He did not wish to trespass on Peter Traill's preserves, but in the absence of Traill he did not see why he shouldn't act as a substitute.

Somers was handing him his hat and gloves when a ring was heard at the flat door.

CHAPTER XX

AN OFFICIAL WARNING

Master and man looked at each other. To both that ring had a sinister sound.

Then Holiday laughed.

"I'm running the risk of being nervy, Somers," he said, "and that's ridiculous."

The servant wrinkled his forehead.

"After what you've told me, sir, I don't wonder at you feeling a bit jumpy," he replied. "I haven't seen any fellows loafin' on the stairs the last couple of days, but one can't be too careful. Would one of these crooks have the impudence to come right up to the door, though?"

"He might."

There was a second ring.

Somers straightened himself.

"I'll open the door, give him a good look over so that I shall remember his face, and then say you're out—how will that do?" he asked.

Holiday had a quick thought.

"Take this," he said, going to a drawer and producing a revolver—the very weapon he had captured from Benelli at the Avignon hotel—"but don't let him see it."

"Leave that to me," replied the ex-lancer confidently.

When Somers had left the room, Holiday experienced a feeling of shame. Why should he expose his servant to a risk he ought to have faced himself? Tingling with the thought, he walked out into the hall.

"Mr. Holiday is not at home," Somers was saying.

"Indeed," came the reply from a man whose profile was just visible; "well, as my business is very important, I think I'll come in and wait."

"I don't think you will," Somers replied; "I have the strictest instructions to allow no one in the flat in Mr. Holiday's absence."

The retort was startling.

"I have called on Government business," said the visitor, "and I warn you not to attempt to place difficulties in my way."

It was time, Holiday thought, to show himself.

"What is this Government business?" he inquired, stepping forward.

Somers gave a short exclamation of astonishment, and the visitor, who now showed himself to be an alert-looking man of early middle-age, smiled.

"I presume that you are Mr. Gerald Holiday?" he remarked.

"I am Holiday—yes."

"And that, after all, you really are at home?"

"I was on the point of going out. As for the statement of my servant, I am 'not at home' for the time being to anyone but my personal friends. There is a reason."

The caller drew out a small case and presented a card.

"I am from the Foreign Office," he said, "and my business is really very urgent. If you do not wish to discuss the matter here, perhaps you would be good enough to come to my own flat."

Holiday shook his head.

"My days for visiting other people's flats have passed," he said, and the visitor smiled again as though he understood.

"If you care to do so," he said, "you can ring up Mr. Laidley Craig, the Permanent Under Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs. He will be pleased to vouch for me. As a matter of fact, it is on his personal instructions that I have called on you to-night. I am one of his private secretaries."

Holiday still hesitated, scrutinizing the speaker intently. In the meanwhile, Somers looked as though he only required the lifting of a finger on the part of his employer to hurl himself at the caller.

"All right," Holiday said at last; "come in." He added to Somers: "You will wait just outside the door, Somers, and come in if I call."

"I will that, sir," said his servant, straightening his shoulders.

When the two were in the sitting-room with the door closed behind them, Holiday gave a brief explanation: "I have recently had two somewhat narrow escapes from being murdered—I do not propose to take any further chances. You may be what you say you are—I am not making any direct accusations, please understand—but if you are not, I promise I shan't be very lenient. I hope I make myself plain?"

"Embarrassingly so." The visitor shrugged his slim, well-tailored shoulders. "If I had imagined I was running such a risk, I would have carried out my original intention and brought a policeman."

Holiday ignored the remark. He looked at the card he still held.

"I must ask you to state your business as quickly as possible, Mr. Stainton."

The caller crossed his knees and pulled up a trouser-leg to preserve a knife-edge crease. He seemed in no way put out by the cavalier treatment.

"As I have already informed you, Mr. Holiday, I have called at the express wish of the Permanent Under Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs." Apparently he found pleasure in repeating the title. "Recently," he continued, "you have found yourself in opposition to certain people. If—as seems likely, judging your temperament from your attitude to me to-night—you contemplate taking any further action in the matter, I have the highest authority for requesting you not to do so." Whilst Holiday looked at him in amazement, Mr. Stainton concluded: "In fact, you can take it that I am not exceeding my instructions when I add that it would be at your own risk if you did attempt any such punitive endeavours."

Holiday felt he was about to choke. Then, conquering his rage, he addressed this curious visitor.

"Let me understand this properly," he said. "I am likely to be put into prison, or something of that sort, for trying to get my own back on a gang who have twice attempted

my life—and who undoubtedly are dangerous criminals. Is that what you wish to tell me?"

Stanton coughed.

"With modifications," he replied, "important modifications. I will put a hypothetical case: Supposing a man in the course of pursuing a private vengeance, learned certain information which, from an official point of view, it was thought not desirable that he should know?"

"Well," said Holiday, very belligerent now, "supposing?"

The envoy from the Foreign Office rose and dusted some imaginary dust off his shoes with a large silk handkerchief.

"I've said enough," he remarked. "I have no doubt, Mr. Holiday, that you possess sufficient intelligence to follow my meaning?"

Although he was seething, the man he addressed asked a question in what he endeavoured to make sound a normal tone.

"Who is to look after me while I stand idly by and wait for these crooks to make a third attempt to kill me? That is what I want to know."

"The authorities," was the answer. "In the meantime, why not leave the country for a while? Believe me," very softly, "it would be best."

Holiday took a step forward.

"Somers," he called.

His servant entered. The ex-lancer was holding his revolver.

"Somers, show this gentleman out."

The visitor glared.

"This is most extraordinary conduct," he protested; "has this man a licence to carry that fire-arm?"

Holiday smiled in what Mr. Stainton afterwards described as a "malicious manner."

"Even if he doesn't possess a licence, he is prepared to use the gun," was the reply. He felt the other's company was becoming oppressive.

It was not until he was half-way through dinner at the Berkeley that Holiday regained his composure sufficiently to view the matter in an unprejudiced light. But, assuming that he had butted in on some scandal of which the Government did not want any outsider to be aware, did that justify the impudence of this inferior official? He should say not. The very thought made his blood boil.

If Valerie Insall had been home, he would have got something of the truth out of her. The situation with which he was now faced was daily—indeed, hourly—becoming more perplexing. So far as he could understand it, he was between two fires. On the one hand, there was Stadenfeld and his gang; and on the other hand, if he started out to track Stadenfeld—as he certainly intended to do at the first available opportunity—he might find himself in trouble with the police.

There was only one safe course. But, if his life depended upon it, he wasn't going to leave England. That would be branding himself as a craven.

Peter Traill! He was the man. Although he had had words with him recently, Traill wouldn't be one to let him down.

When he put the thing to him fairly and squarely, Peter would tell him the truth—under a pledge of confidence, of course.

He'd go straight home and write Traill a line—ask him to call directly he was free.

It was not until he had reached the turn in the stairs which opened on his flat door, that he remembered the disquieting news Bishop had brought earlier that evening.

Peter Traill had disappeared.

At the moment the memory returned, he stopped. There was a man on the stairs directly outside the flat door.

He looked at the fellow curiously. There was something familiar in the other's back.

Then he rushed forward.

"Peter!" he called.

But he received no response. When he put his hand on the other's shoulder, the man fell on him.

He must be drunk.

A closer examination told him the truth.

Traill was not drunk.

He was dead.

CHAPTER XXI

THE CARD ON THE CORPSE

TRAILL—dead!

That first overwhelming thought shut out everything else. No other consideration weighed against it. Peter Traill dead! It was too incredible to be believed, too ghastly to be comprehended.

But that sagging body, looking like a broken doll, was evidence that could not be gainsaid.

Holiday remained motionless. Memories of the good times Traill and he had spent together surged through his mind.

The first paralysing shock passed. A bleak rage took the place of that numbing surprise. His friend was dead—but who had killed him? He would have to find that out. And when he had discovered it, he would settle with the murderer.

The next moment Holiday had bent forward. There was something white on Traill's coat. Stooping, he saw it was a piece of pasteboard the size of a visiting-card, but with some typewritten words on it instead of print.

A small, neat hole had been pierced in it; through this a piece of thin white string had been threaded, and this attached the card to the dead man's button-hole.

On the card were the words:

With the compliments of the sender.

For a brief space Holiday thought he would go mad. This was the final cynically inhuman touch to the whole diablerie.

Clenching his hands, he returned slowly to sanity. Stepping over the body, he opened the door of the flat and called his servant.

Somers looked inquiringly at the prone figure.

"Why, it's Mr. Traill, sir—but how bad he looks!"

"He's dead, Somers—murdered."

"Dead, sir—murdered?" There was incredulity in the man's voice.

"He's dead, certainly—and I'm equally certain he's been murdered."

"But who did it, sir?—who would want to murder a gentleman like Mr. Traill?"

"The same crowd that tried to do me in."

Somers first stared, and then softly whistled. "That's why he was brought here, then, sir?"

"Undoubtedly. It was their form of 'humour.'"

"Peculiar sort of joke, sir."

"You're right, Somers—but this crowd happen to be peculiar in more ways than one. You had better go out and find the nearest policeman. We must not touch the body until he comes."

Whilst Somers was away, Holiday got through to the telephone number which Bishop had left with him earlier that evening.

The Secret Service man promised to be round immediately.

Before he arrived, Somers had returned with a policeman.

"If you don't mind, sir," the latter said to Holiday, "I should like to use your telephone. I must ring up the station. This is a police-surgeon's job."

The doctor arrived in company with a detective-sergeant. The latter waited whilst the police-surgeon made a rapid examination of the body.

"This man has been poisoned—exactly what was used I cannot say without a post-mortem; he has been dead about six hours," was the doctor's verdict.

The detective nodded.

"Now, Mr. Holiday," he said, "I should like all the information you are able to give me."

Holiday was in the middle of his brief story—he confined himself to the barest details—when Bishop entered. The detective looked at the new-comer with interest.

"Have you any connection with this case, Mr. Bishop?" he asked.

"Unfortunately, I have, Stephens," was the answer. "Mr. Traill was a colleague of mine."

The detective pursed his lips.

"Secret Service, eh?" he murmured. "I thought it might be."

Ten minutes later, the body was removed, and Bishop and his host were alone.

"Of course, Stadenfeld has done this," said Holiday.

Bishop nodded gloomily.

"Stadenfeld—or the man for whom he works," he replied. "Look here, Holiday, the time has passed for beating about the bush. You're in this thing up to your neck now; I'd better take you along to see the Chief."

"Will that mean a job?"

"A temporary one, perhaps. I didn't suggest it before because both Traill and I thought it was asking you to take too big a risk; besides, there are all sorts of restrictions against roping in casual labour, as you may imagine. But the situation has changed now. This unpleasantness on the part of Stadenfeld to-night, proves that he considers you important enough to be considered. That means, in turn, that you are a marked man. . . . Come along and see the Chief. But remember this: not a word is to be said about Valerie Insall. Don't ask me why, because I shan't tell you."

A man of sixty, tall, spare of figure, with the ascetic face of a monk and a noble head crowned with white hair, greeted Holiday courteously.

"I have heard something about you, Mr. Holiday," he said, "and I am very pleased to meet you."

Eden Leycester listened attentively to the story which Bishop told. Holiday noticed that the latter made no mention of Valerie Insall.

"I hope I did right in bringing Holiday along, sir," Bishop concluded. "As this crowd have evidently marked him down, he might as well be with us, I thought."

"I quite agree," was the answer.

Half an hour later, when Bishop and Holiday left Queen Anne Mansions, the latter was an accredited member of the British Secret Service.

"Traill still lived alone, I suppose?" he asked when they stood in Whitehall—at Bishop's suggestion they had avoided crossing St. James's Park.

"Quite alone. A woman used to come in to clean his rooms, that was all."

"There doesn't seem much use our going round there, then."

"We could try. I have a key."

But the visit yielded nothing. The rooms gave up neither suspicion nor clue.

"We shall know in time," said Bishop.

"And when we do——"

"Exactly."

It was with a heavy heart that Valerie Insall turned away from the telephone after speaking to Gerald Holiday. She had done what she considered was her duty, but that knowledge gave her only a modicum of comfort. What was the use in meeting a man in whom one could take an interest if one had to tell him to go away and leave one alone? The fact that, in her own case, she was doing this in what she considered was the man's best interests, did little to mitigate the pain.

For it had reached that stage: thinking of Gerald Holiday brought something more than mental unrest; it caused her a definite hurt.

Was Holiday interested in her? She believed he was. This made the sacrifice all the harder; yet, nevertheless, she could not yield. When the work she had set herself to do was accomplished, the situation would be different. Then —if she were still alive—— But thinking in that direction was not to be encouraged at the present time. Yet how ardently she found herself wishing she had accepted Holiday's invitation to meet him! Now the chance was gone—she had deliberately thrown it away—and Holiday wasn't the type to make himself cheap. However much he might wish to see her, he would hesitate to make further advances after having been turned down.

The initiative had been with her—and she had declined it. He would not forget that. Perhaps doubts still rankled with regard to finding her in Peter Traill's rooms so early in the morning. Yet he had seemed to overcome these and had proffered his friendship. Oh, she must have been mad. . . .

In that moment of temptation, Valerie was sorely tried. It showed the stuff of which she was made when, after putting a hand on the telephone receiver, she turned away without making the call.

The flat seemed intolerable; she would go out to dinner somewhere.

CHAPTER XXII

THE BLACK BOOK

Hector Pandervell was in a good humour.

"You have done well," he said. "Traill would undoubtedly have caused us a great deal of mischief if he had not been dealt with."

Stadenfeld, to whom the complimentary remarks were addressed, smiled. From his coat-pocket he produced a package about the size of a medium envelope.

"You will be pleased to see this," he said; "here are particulars of everyone in the Organization with the exception of ourselves, representing the English branch. This was the information which the girl Insall obtained whilst she was at Kuropatin's villa at Beauvallon, posing as a governess. The facts are concisely written, and the photographs, considering they must have been taken secretly and by a small camera, are excellent."

Pandervell, after examining the contents of the package for himself, asked the obvious question.

"Where did you find this?"

"In the wall-safe in Traill's rooms. I called on Traill late this afternoon in a private capacity. As a matter of fact, I posed as an agent of the Belgian Secret Service." The speaker paused. "What I had to do was done quickly. The drug, as

you said it would, acted marvellously. Then came the question of disposing of the body. Where do you think I took it?"

"The wisest course would have been to leave it where it was. A verdict of suicide would possibly have been returned."

Stadenfeld shook his head.

"Too prosaic," he replied. "After typing a few words on a card, using Traill's own machine, I tied the card to the body and took it to Mount Street."

"Mount Street! Why Mount Street?"

"Because it is at No. 221 that the man Holiday lives. I left the corpse outside his door."

"A melodramatic touch, my dear Stadenfeld," remarked the other, "but, I admit, rather an effective one. What was the message on the card, pray?"

"'With the compliments of the sender.'"

Pandervell laughed.

"You are sometimes quite droll," he remarked. "And now let us discuss the other affair. I am expecting Lulu every minute."

The speaker had scarcely settled himself into his chair, before the door opened and the woman whose name he had mentioned came into the room. She walked quickly and her manner was purposeful.

"Well, I've got what you wanted," she told Pandervell. Her hands, now that her gloves were off, revealed nails so over-manicured that they looked like coloured talons.

Hector Pandervell smiled at her through the smoke of his cigar. The gathering of this information might mean a great deal to his future plans—especially to the success of

the particular *coup* he was endeavouring to arrange. His good humour increased. This was really a most enjoyable evening.

"My congratulations, Lulu—but I knew you would not fail," he replied.

Lulu Chartres crossed one plump, silk-clad leg over the other and lit a cigarette.

"It wasn't too easy," she stated; "this Lord Hedingfield person may have his weaknesses, but he's got enough sense to keep them well covered."

"Ah!" remarked the man to whom she was making her report; "but so long as he has his weaknesses . . . tell me, my dear."

The woman studied him for a few moments, her eyes bitterly cynical.

"You'd have done fine in the time of one of those French kings," she summed up; and then, as Pandervell made a gesture of mild impatience: "Oh, all right; I'm coming to it. Listen!"

The story which she proceeded to tell was not pleasant to hear. Judging by the attention which Pandervell gave to it, however, the listener found it exceedingly interesting. Which was only natural, considering that by its means Pandervell meant to rob the bearer of an illustrious name of everything that he still held dear in life.

"And you have proofs, of course?" he inquired in a tone of perfect courtesy.

"What do you think?" The reply was almost contemptuously abrupt. "But this," taking an envelope out of her

handbag and tossing it to Pandervell, "cost money. Valets to English lords have their price, let me tell you."

Pandervell did not reply until he had extracted the papers in the envelope and read them.

"How much did you give the man?"

"Fifty pounds. He will want another twenty-five if we buy."

"He shall have the money—this is valuable." Pandervell smiled as a man smiles who is convinced he has just made a good bargain. Then, unlocking a drawer in a handsome cabinet, he took out a roll of bank-notes.

"Here's a hundred, Lulu—buy yourself a small present for being a good girl."

The woman put the largesse away in her bag with the remark: "I'll have something now—a drink."

Pandervell was instantly on his feet.

"My dear Lulu—and you, Stadenfeld, I offer you my most sincere apologies. Forgive me for being so inhospitable. In the stress of affairs, I forgot." He pressed a button in the wall and gave an order to the manservant who answered the summons.

"I think this is an occasion on which we are justified in drinking Pommery of a good year," he remarked to his two guests; "the hour is unusual—but so is the occasion."

Five minutes later these three oddly assorted criminals were toasting each other.

"There's just one thing I should like to know before I toddle off," said Lulu, extending her empty glass to be replenished, "and that is: when are we going to settle with

that man Holiday? Settle finally, I mean," with a glance at Stadenfeld.

"Plans are being made," was Pandervell's answer; "you need not be afraid that Holiday is being overlooked. You seem to have a personal interest in that direction."

"I have," said the woman with an oath; "he nearly got me pinched at Monte. An Argentine millionaire I had my eye on left nearly a thousand quid on the table, and I had practically got away with it when this Holiday fellow called a *chef de partie*. As I say, I nearly got pinched. As it was, I had a warning that my presence was no longer welcome in the rooms."

"An unfortunate ending to what should have been a pleasant holiday," commented Pandervell; "I can understand your resentment. When the time arrives, I promise that you shall deal with Holiday personally."

"I wanted to do that the other night at Edgware," she said, scowling a second time at Stadenfeld.

"As it happened, it was a good thing you didn't," retorted Stadenfeld, speaking for the first time; "personally, I leave murder—crude killing, that is—to other people—Benelli, for preference."

"Yes," supported Pandervell, "murder is certainly a thing to be avoided—except, of course, as a last resource. Still, there are occasions. . . ."

Lulu Chartres stood up.

"I can promise you this," she declared; "if ever I get the chance—and if you," looking at Pandervell, "don't give it me, I'll provide it myself—of having Holiday where I want

him, I shan't stop to do any thinking. I'm dining at Rimini's to-night, in case you should want me."

With the woman gone, the two who were left looked at each other.

"Useful, but apt to be dangerous," remarked Pandervell. "Later on, when she has done a few commissions . . ."

Stadenfeld nodded. Although Pandervell did not complete what he had been about to say, he knew what was in the other's mind.

Hector Pandervell enjoyed his dinner that night. He dined alone, but he found his own company sufficiently entertaining.

Things were going well. The house at Edgware had been covered by insurance—the policy was not made out in his own name, of course—and although it had angered him at the time at having to destroy this workshop of Merritt's, he was reconciled now to the fact.

After the meal, he concentrated on business. This, to the ordinary onlooker, would have seemed to consist in taking what looked like an ordinary ledger out of a safe and making certain entries in it.

These were docketed under the letter "H" and included the information which Lulu Chartres had been able to obtain through bribing the venal valet of Lord Hedingfield.

Pandervell, when he had finished, placed the ledger—his Black Book he called it, with a grim sense of humour—carefully back in the safe. He lived by that book and the shameful secrets it contained, so, of course, he had to treat it carefully.

CHAPTER XXIII

MRS. LAIDLEY CRAIG AT HOME

The two people who were alone in this fantastically furnished room afforded such a striking contrast that a stranger would instantly have remarked upon the circumstance. Even to their familiars, the thought that such a pair had become united in matrimony never ceased to intrigue. With the appalling candour of the age, Laidley Craig and his wife were known as "The Hermit and the Urchin." The description was not inapt.

These ill-matched persons had married fifteen years before. It was a match of convenience. Society became first incredulous, and then shook with laughter: the idea of Olive Bramper marrying the stiff and staid Civil Servant who, even in those days, was as inelastic in mind as he was in body, seemed too ludicrous. Why, said everyone, within a month they would both expire of mutual boredom: Craig would fret her stiff with his solemnity; whilst "The Urchin," as she had been called since her schooldays, would revolt his set mind by her outrages of conduct.

That was what the world said; but the years had gone on and the most ill-assorted pair in London had continued to live with each other. There was no open scandal, although the servants at the house in Wyndham Gardens could have told many stories.

His wife, being the daughter of an impoverished Peer, had brought him some sort of social status, and Craig, always a prodigious worker, had climbed in his profession until he had become Permanent Under-Secretary at the Foreign Office. Incidentally, he had added to his hobbies that of secret drinking, but no one knew of this except his intimates, and the vice did not interfere with his duties. Only at night, when his wife filled the house with the most rackety set in London, Laidley Craig could have been found locked in his study. Often he would be asleep; at other times he would be drunk. . . .

Each had brought to the other something. It pleased the most bizarre woman in London to be the wife of a man who was known as a brilliant servant of the State—a man occupying one of the most responsible positions under the Crown. As for Laidley Craig, his work sufficed him: he was so absorbed in his Foreign Office duties that he allowed "The Urchin" to go her own flamboyant way. Perhaps, in some inscrutable manner, this mole of a man found some satisfaction in giving his name to a creature whose doings filled the newspaper headlines at least one morning in every seven. Or, what was far more likely, he had long since ceased to care.

The drawing-room in which he now sat studying some official documents, had been furnished by his wife. It struck the same hysterical note as the rest of the house. The only sane room was his study—and this was bare to the point of severity.

The woman whose bitter tongue was feared throughout

London looked across at her husband's commonplace figure and bit the nail of her right forefinger. She must get a look at those papers somehow. Her need was desperate.

"What on earth are you swotting over to-night?" she asked. The voice was as unpleasant as the rest of her, being harsh and coarse. Cigarettes and cocktails had played their part; but from a child, her voice had "given one the shudders"—to quote an early nurse.

"Official business." Craig's reply was curt to the point of brusqueness. In practically every other detail but living in the same house with her, he treated this woman as though she were a stranger.

His wife lit another cigarette.

"No wonder people say you run the F.O. on your own, my dear man—a great many women, I suppose, would complain at being so neglected."

Laidley Craig looked up from his papers.

"I scarcely think you have any reason to complain," he replied; "I leave you entirely free to indulge your peculiar fancies—that was the arrangement we made fifteen years ago, and I believe I have kept to the bargain."

The woman shrugged the shoulders which looked so thin and unattractive above the daringly cut evening-gown.

"I wish you would give me more of your confidence," she said; "after all, I am your wife."

Craig took off his reading-glasses.

"Confidence in reference to—what?" he inquired. Beneath the quietness of the tone was a thin irony.

"Everything." She knew this was venturing on treacher-

ous ground, but the danger she was in made her reckless.

"If you refer to official matters, I confide in no one," was the answer; "and if I did, you, my dear Olive, would be the last person in whom I should feel inclined to put any trust. You must realize that yourself."

A longing to murder him was born in her soul. Then suddenly she laughed. If this poor fool only knew. . . .

"I always welcome the truth; as you know, it is one of my few remaining virtues. But you must trust someone—a good many people, to my personal knowledge, are discussing the F.O. Scandal, as they call it."

"There is no scandal," he said curtly.

His wife laughed again.

"That's a lie. There's a continual leakage going on, and in spite of all the precautions you have taken. there's no clue as to the thief."

He looked at her so steadily that she commenced to feel uneasy. Had she said too much?

"Believe me, we shall discover the thief before long," he said. "And now," gathering up the papers, "I am going to bed."

She picked up a novel as he rose.

"I think I shall read for a bit."

"Very well. Good night."

"Good night."

She heard him go into his study, which was on the other side of the hall. The novel, although the cover bore the name of a writer famous for the holding power of his narratives,

could not have been very interesting, for Mrs. Laidley Craig put it down, walked quietly to the door and looked across the hall. She saw that the study door was closed.

After reflecting a moment, she returned to the divan on which she had been sitting, picked up the book again, and then, leaving the room, walked across to the study.

"Are you in there?" she asked, and put a hand on the door-knob.

It did not yield.

A passion of fury convulsed her face.

"Why have you locked this door?" she demanded.

She had to wait a couple of minutes before there was any reply.

Then the door opened and her husband came out; he drew the door so quickly after him that it seemed he was determined she should not enter the study.

"The answer to that should be obvious," he replied, and turning his back, he locked the door on the outside.

"I think I've already said good night." He walked towards the staircase.

The description which once had been given of Mrs. Laidley Craig, that she looked like a bird of prey, would have pleased the person who had uttered it, as the woman, walking back to the drawing-room, flung herself into a chair. This scion of the aristocracy seemed now, what she was, a creature of evil moods.

"He suspects," was the thought which flashed through

her brain; "that was why he would not let me go into the study. Although he has no definite proof, the fool believes it might be possible that I know something. What would he do if——?"

The question made her frown. After a quarter of an hour, she went up to her room, making more noise than was necessary.

An hour later she returned downstairs. On this occasion she walked as quietly as possible. She might have been a thief.

Although she was so desperate—the contempt with which Pandervell had treated her the last time she had seen him had bitten like acid into her mind—she felt a momentary spasm of fear as she started to fit the key she had had made from a wax impression into the study door.

Before she could turn the key, she heard a voice. It was her husband's.

"What are you doing there?" From the top of the first bend in the staircase, Laidley Craig was looking down at her.

She turned quickly, the hand behind her back withdrawing stealthily the key from the door.

"How you startled me!" she replied. "I couldn't sleep, so came down for my book. Go back to bed and don't be a fool, Laidley."

The retort was threateningly grim.

"I may have been a fool in the past, but I don't intend to be one in the future. Go back to bed yourself."

The wife of his bosom cursed him beneath her breath.

Now that she had failed again, she would have to deal with the Insall girl, if Pandervell was to be kept in a good humour. The week-end party at The Barn might be a good opportunity.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE SMASH

THE magic of early summer gilded the scene. The fragrance of flowers pervaded the air. From the terrace on which she stood, Valerie could see for miles across the fairest lands of Surrey. The sight soothed her not too steady nerves.

"Well, what do you think of my little place?" asked Mrs. Laidley Craig.

With her eyes still fixed on that wonderful vista of English country-side, Valerie sighed. "I think it's like a dream —almost too beautiful to be real," she said.

Her hostess laughed. The sound was so discordant it shattered the peace which had seemed so wonderful a minute before.

"It's real enough; wait until the crowd arrive," said Mrs. Laidley Craig. "My dear, I am *so* glad you decided to come"; placing a veined hand on the girl's shoulder, she added: "I am such a horrible-looking creature myself that I like to have beautiful girls around me—and you are quite the loveliest thing I have seen this year."

Valerie tried to repress the shudder that went through her. The very presence of this woman inspired dread. She turned away, affecting to study a climbing rose-bush.

"I shall insist upon seeing lots of you in the future, darling," went on the woman in her harsh voice.

It had to stop. Valerie felt she couldn't stand any more.

"Will you excuse me? I want to go to my room," she said, and left abruptly. Another moment, and she would have had to push the woman away.

Sitting at the open window of her bedroom, looking out upon the sunken rose-garden, she found it difficult to reconcile this peaceful and beautiful spot with the scenes of riotous revelry which she guessed would probably shortly commence. The main body of Mrs. Laidley Craig's week-end party had not yet arrived: so far she was the only guest.

There was a reason, of course, why she had come to The Barn, the Laidley Craigs' country house in Surrey. Mrs. Laidley Craig was the wife of the Permanent Under-Secretary of the Foreign Office—and there was more than one end to the mystery, to the unravelling of which she was devoting her life. A conclusion had been forming itself in her mind for some time past, and she was anxious to try to ascertain if there might be any foundation for this surmise. What better opportunity could she have than an invitation to the woman's home?

Mrs. Laidley Craig's week-end parties were notorious. For one thing, they were the scandal of the adjacent countryside: new-comers, thinking of settling at Wykeham, were often induced to change their minds when told that "the Laidley Craig woman" had a place near.

Valerie knew this—and she also knew that one had to belong to a particular set before one could hope to be asked to Wykeham. Although her mind revolted at the idea of spending Friday to Monday with such company as she was

pretty certain to meet, yet determination made her look round for an opportunity to receive an invitation.

The American girl with whom she had dined on the night she had been the means of rescuing Gerald Holiday, proved an unconscious ally. Maisie Chard, back in Town after another flying visit to the Continent, had "thrown" a cocktail party. Being so rich that nothing which did not cost a fabulous amount had the slightest interest for her, Maisie's party had been unique of its type. Over five hundred guests, including practically all the personalities, attractive and otherwise, whom the newspaper gossip-writers love to prattle about, accepted invitations. Amongst the visitors was Mrs. Laidley Craig.

Valerie herself had gone out of a sense of curiosity. Whilst Maisie Chard did not appeal to her particularly as a friend, the American girl interested her as a type. Frank to a degree, courageous to the point of recklessness, willing in her own words "to try everything once," Maisie was a good example of the New Young. Flaming Youth had nothing on her, she was prone to say. Yet let her suffer from such a minor ailment as a headache and she went to bed "all in." A curious character.

Although she had seen Mrs. Laidley Craig many times in public, Valerie had never before met her face to face. The woman, to her surprise, sought her out almost as soon as she entered the room.

"That sweet child, Maisie Chard, has been talking about you, my dear," she said; "I am giving a week-end party at

my cottage in Surrey. Maisie is coming, and I want you also to promise. Don't say you have a previous engagement."

Valerie did not hesitate.

"As a matter of fact, I haven't. I shall be very pleased to come."

So Friday afternoon had seen her at The Barn. Maisie Chard had elected to stay in London. She had contracted a chill, or imagined that she had, and so Valerie had been forced to drive down from Town alone.

There was a knock on the door. Reluctantly she rose to answer it.

"Darling!" cried Mrs. Laidley Craig, bursting into the room; "what have I done to deserve such treatment? Just when everyone is dying to meet you, to go hiding yourself away like this! Aren't you well?" the inquiring voice went on shrilly.

Valerie rallied herself. It was only sheer determination that enabled her to do it, however.

"I'm perfectly fit," she replied; "really, I did not mean to be rude." A white lie was excusable in the circumstances, she thought. "I came up to get a handkerchief, and the scene was so beautiful from this window that I forgot the time."

"Then why did you lock the door?" Upon her hostess' features was a look of cunning.

"Did I? How stupid! I'm quite ready now." She smiled into the haglike face.

A minute later she was being introduced to a number of

men and women whose doings she had often read about in the newspapers. All were members of the ironically called "Save our Souls" movement.

It being the fashion to be rude on every occasion when good manners should have prevailed, each person, upon being introduced to Valerie, acknowledged the presentation by a gibe so offensive as to make her flush. And the deeper the flush the more the "joke" was enjoyed.

There were roars of laughter at each quip—the S.O.S.s took their humour crude and raw—and the victim bit her lip. These human freaks would have liked her to have turned and fled, she supposed, but she was going to deny them that satisfaction. She intended staying and meeting any further challenge that might be made; for only in this way would she be able to achieve the object for which she had laid herself open to such humiliation.

Tea was taken on the lawn—and the meal mainly consisted in throwing food and the dregs of tea at each other. Every now and then, one of the party would vanish into the house and reappear exhibiting even more noisy animal spirits than before. There were references to "It," and at such times furtive glances were directed at the one member of the company who was supposed not to be in the secret.

But Valerie knew. These people were drug-takers. If the hostess shared this vice, the vague suspicion which had formed in her mind would receive further support.

It was whilst she was taking a stroll round the garden after tea that her hostess came rushing up to her.

"Darling Valerie," said Mrs. Laidley Craig, "do let me

introduce a very great friend of mine—Mr. Hector Pandervell."

Valerie turned to see a tall, distinguished-looking man looking at her intently.

With the eyes of this aristocratic person fixed so keenly on her, she became momentarily confused. It was foolish, no doubt, but she was not able to help herself. She had the feeling that this man was endeavouring—and not only endeavouring, but succeeding—in reading her inmost thoughts.

Yet his first words were kindly and gracious.

"It is a great pleasure to meet you, Miss Insall."

The voice was cultured and pleasant. She accepted the extended hand, wondering if she had met Hector Pandervell before, and where.

"You'll excuse me if I rush away, Valerie, darling," said Mrs. Laidley Craig; "I have rather a lot to do, and I can safely leave you with Mr. Pandervell, because he is easily the most interesting man I know." With a smile and a wave of the hand, her hostess was gone.

"I am afraid that is far too pretentious a reputation for me to attempt to live up to," remarked Pandervell as, matching his pace with hers, they walked slowly down the terrace.

Yet, as he talked, Valerie decided that the compliment Mrs. Laidley Craig had paid this man was not extravagant. Without any effort, Pandervell proved that he could talk easily and yet authoritatively on practically any subject—art, sport, travel, literature. Many of his views were novel, but, laced as they were by an agreeable, if slightly ironical

humour, they commanded her interest and gripped her attention. Without asking for any confidences, Pandervell encouraged her to talk about herself and her own experiences of life. Had she been to the Riviera? Valerie at this point pulled herself up; an instinctive feeling warned her. She confessed to having paid a visit to the Côte d'Azur "in common with the rest of the world."

Pandervell smiled.

"I wonder if you share my views?" he said. "It is unorthodox among people of our type and class, I know, but I consider the French Riviera the most overrated place in the world. Snobbery alone keeps it popular and fashionable. I go myself merely because I follow a habit, but when I arrive at any of the centres—excepting Monte Carlo, which is a jewel of a town if you do not stay too long—I always ask myself: 'Why on earth have I come here?' It is a plague-spot for many diseases; the wise person invariably drinks mineral water; the bathing is very restricted owing to the tideless sea; whilst the streets, especially in Cannes, are so shockingly neglected that in walking through them one is forced to breathe in clouds of dust. But perhaps you preferred the less obvious districts, Miss Insall?"

Valerie did not allow herself to be taken off her guard. The questioner was a very delightful man, but she was not prepared to share her secrets with him.

"Yes, I avoided the more obvious places," she replied briefly. Her tone did not encourage further discussion on the subject, and the conversation veered round to their hostess.

"What do you think of your fellow-guests, Miss Insall?" Pandervell inquired. "But I can already supply the answer," he went on so quickly that she had no time in which to frame a more or less discreet reply. "Yet I would not judge Mrs. Laidley Craig too harshly or too hastily. She is a woman who is greatly misjudged in the eyes of the world. A person of super-abundant energy, she finds an outlet for this mental and physical activity in entertaining a class of modern youth whom you and I, as normally minded folk, can only describe as freaks. Still, there is a great deal of good and very little real harm in Mrs. Laidley Craig. Her marriage, of course, has not been a happy one, and when one reaches my age, one becomes tolerant of a woman who, through ill-fortune, has missed the greatest joy in life." The speaker looked at his watch. "I live a few miles away, just beyond Dorking, Miss Insall; I should be delighted if you would come to tea to-morrow."

"I will if I can," she replied. The prospect of being able to get away from the rowdy crowd at The Barn, if only for a few hours, gave some warmth to the words.

Pandervell shook hands cordially as he wished her good-bye.

"One of my oldest friends," Mrs. Laidley Craig explained when Pandervell had gone. "He appeared to take a great fancy to you, dearest."

Valerie squirmed at the affectionate term. In spite of Hector Pandervell's defence, she could not overcome her intuitive dislike of the woman. At the same time, she remembered

she had a duty to do, and forced a smile as she replied: "I am glad, for I think he is a very charming and delightful man. He invited me to tea to-morrow."

Her hostess gave a shrill cry of real or affected alarm.

"But, my darling, I couldn't possibly spare you—not even to please such an old friend as Hector Pandervell!"

So the visit to Dorking did not come off. During the whole of the week-end Valerie was allowed no time to herself, and it was with a feeling of tremendous relief that, after swallowing a cup of tea at four o'clock on Monday afternoon, she wished her hostess good-bye and walked out to her Singer two-seater, which had been ordered from the garage.

Once away from the house, which would always hold such unpleasant memories for her, she abandoned herself to thought. It was with this express intention that she avoided the main route to Town, where she knew the traffic would be considerable, and slipped away into the unfrequented by-ways. She longed for solitude after the hectic rowdiness of the week-end.

Her visit, she was forced to admit, had been a failure. Although she had kept her eyes and ears open, she could not learn anything of value. That Mrs. Laidley Craig had as friends many men and women whose conduct could only be termed outrageous when viewed from an ordinary standard of decency, had been obvious, but beyond that she had not been able to go.

Her main feeling was one of personal humiliation. She considered herself soiled. The only consolatory feature of the week-end was the meeting with Hector Pandervell. It

was curious how a man of such unmistakable good-breeding could allow his standard of criticism to relax when personal friendship entered into the question.

Yet what bond could there be between a man like Pandervell and a woman of Mrs. Laidley Craig's type? The two seemed poles apart—an absolutely incongruous combination.

Valerie's thought switched into another channel. With her car running smoothly in the direction of London, it was natural, perhaps, that she should find herself speculating about those who lived there. Especially did she think about a man—by name, Gerald Holiday.

Had Holiday really taken "no" for an answer this time? Had he become fed up with what must seem a hopeless quest, and gone abroad? Whilst she hoped so for his own sake, yet she was honest enough with herself to realize that his absence from London would give her a sense of desolation which, at the beginning, might prove overwhelming. Temptation came, but she thrust it from her: a man like Gerald Holiday, who had everything in life, could not be allowed to venture farther into the danger which would be bound to encompass him after what had already happened. If he did so of his own accord, she could not help it, of course—but at least she had made her plea. In any case, she must put forth a fresh and even more determined endeavour to forget the man.

The two-seater was approaching a bend in the Surrey lane as she made this reflection, and looking into her driving-mirror, she noticed a heavy saloon-car behind. It was being

driven at a speed which was not only reckless, but dangerous.

She accelerated slightly, at the same time putting out her right hand.

The driver of the saloon-car ignored her signal. The great car came on like a destroying Juggernaut.

Too late Valerie attempted to swerve. The collision was inevitable. The next moment a tremendous crashing sound filled her ears, she was hurled violently forward, and then a blackness came, blotting out everything.

At that moment, back at The Barn, Mrs. Laidley Craig was telling the guests who remained for dinner that that sweet darling, the Insall girl, was not returning to Town, but had said she was driving to the Midlands—somewhere near Leicester, she understood—where she was due to pay a visit.

CHAPTER XXV

ON THE TRACK

Holiday waited impatiently. The news the maid had given him, that Miss Insall had left Town for the week-end and was still away, was disquieting. He could not forget that Valerie Insall was a colleague of Peter Traill, and that Traill was dead—cunningly murdered.

"Miss Chard, mistress's friend, will be pleased to see you if you will come up." The maid, now returned, gave him the message.

When he reached the sitting-room of the small flat, a girl, dressed in clothes so simple that he knew they represented the last word in fleeting fashion, rose from a chair, extending a hand.

"My name's Maisie Chard," this girl, who combined a childish figure with an air of extreme sophistication, announced. "I'm by way of being a friend of Val Insall's. That's why I'm here."

Holiday smiled at the frankness of the speaker, whose accent pronounced her to be an American.

"My name's Gerald Holiday, and I, too, am by way of being a friend of Miss Insall. That's why *I'm* here," he said.

"Well," drawled Maisie Chard, "I'm sorry you've had a

wasted journey. Val went away for the week-end, you know, and should have been back to-day. It was with the idea of saying hullo that I called round."

Holiday pulled out his cigarette-case.

"Will you think me unpardonably rude if I ask one or two questions?" he inquired, lighting the girl's cigarette. "Let me assure you," he added, "I have a very good reason."

"Fire away. And as we're going to hold this communion of souls, you might as well sit down."

Holiday, thus adjured, pulled forward a chair.

"As I say," he repeated, "I have a very good reason for desiring this information. Do you mind telling me where Miss Insall spent the week-end?"

The American girl flicked the ash off her cigarette.

"Surely. She was with Mrs. Laidley Craig's week-end party at Wykeham, near Dorking, Surrey. I was to have gone myself, only I didn't feel up to it at the last moment, and so I spent the week-end in bed. I'm sorry now I did."

"Why?" Holiday, whose curiosity had been aroused by the mention of Mrs. Laidley Craig's name, was further intrigued by the expression which had come momentarily into the other's face.

"Well," replied the girl, "Mrs. Laidley Craig's week-end parties are sometimes rather what you call in this country 'advanced,' and poor Val might have felt out of it. You know what a shrinking violet she is: I can't imagine her mixing very well with that crowd. That is why I wish I'd gone with her in spite of feeling queer."

Holiday asked another question.

"When was Miss Insall expected back?"

"No particular time, but I imagined she would be home by tea-time to-day. That is why I drove round. But I can't wait any longer. I must get back to change. Can I drop you anywhere?"

"It's very kind of you, but I have my own car outside."

They parted cordially on the pavement outside the flat. Maisie Chard, as she drove back to the Ritz, where she had her present humble lodging—a suite usually occupied by visiting Royalty—communed with herself. Her thoughts ran in this fashion: "That man's in love with Val. And why not? Val's just about the prettiest thing I've seen on this side. Bit dignified and up-stage sometimes, but she's all the better for that. She makes the grade all right—there's breeding there. She deserves a good man.

"And this man Holiday. He's the real thing, too. He wears his clothes as though he had been poured into them, and he'd make any right-minded girl think about honeymoons. . . . If he wasn't head over heels in love with Val Insall, I'd have a shot at him myself. Well, here's hoping they fix it up. I'll be first bridesmaid if they ask me." Having come to an end of her reflections, Maisie accelerated, and when a disapproving policeman frowned at her, blew that horrified official a kiss. . . .

Holiday would have gone straight to Sir Eden Leycester but for the ban which Bishop had told him was on Valerie Insall's name. As it was, he drove straight to Bishop's new rooms in Guilford Street.

Here disappointment again met him.

"But Mr. Bishop is away, sir," said the woman who answered the door; "I'm his landlady—at least, he rents the rooms from me," she went on to explain.

"Away," repeated the caller, feeling that he was in danger of losing his temper. "When is he expected back?"

"Ah, as for that, sir, I'm unable to say," was the reply. "Mr. Bishop, although as nice a man as one could wish to meet, never talks about his business—as a matter of fact, I don't even know what his business is, except that it's something to do with men's hosiery. But I think he'll be away for some time."

"Why do you think that?"

"Because he left a note saying he might not be back for some days."

"Thank you." There was thunder on Holiday's brow as he turned away. With so much at stake, he considered that Bishop might have left him some kind of message. Was he investigating poor old Peter's death? And if so, why hadn't he asked him to lend a hand?

Back at the wheel of his car, Holiday's mood changed. He was glad that Bishop was out of the way—the other's absence left the field clear for him: he would follow up this disappearance—if disappearance it was—on his own.

He waited until the following afternoon. Although his impatience was the most severe strain on his nervous system that he had ever experienced, he realized that it would be foolish to be too precipitate. But when a telephone message to the flat at three-thirty on the following afternoon elicited

the fact that Valerie Insall had still not returned, and that no word had been received from her, he decided that it was time he began to take active measures.

After looking up the address in the telephone directory, he drove straight to the Laidley Craigs' house in Wyndham Gardens, and having ascertained that Mrs. Laidley Craig was at home, sent in his card.

He was permitted to wait in a big hall, and whilst he waited, he endeavoured to recall all that he had heard of the woman he proposed very shortly to cross-examine. Scarcely a thing he was able to remember was satisfactory.

It took the maidservant the whole of ten minutes—Holiday marked the time by his watch—to return, and when she did show herself again, she looked confused.

"Mrs. Laidley Craig apologizes for having kept you waiting, sir," she said. "May I take your hat and coat?"

Having handed over these articles, the visitor followed the maid into a room, the decoration of which made him blink. A woman, who looked even more haglike in life than she did in her newspaper photographs, rose from a ridiculous chair.

"I am Mrs. Laidley Craig," she announced.

Holiday bowed.

"I am honoured at being permitted to meet you, Mrs. Laidley Craig," he replied, and if there was irony of the finest grade in the words, the woman affected not to have noticed it. "I have called to make a few inquiries about a friend of mine."

His hostess became gracious.

"Do sit down, Mr. Holiday. You smoke, of course?" holding out a box containing Balkan cigarettes—nothing so prosaic as mere Virginia or Turkish cigarettes for Mrs. Laidley Craig. "Now tell me: what is it you wish to know?"

Holiday did not reply for a moment. His attention was otherwise engaged. Some ten feet away, and at the back of Mrs. Laidley Craig, was a thick drapery. This, so well as he could judge, seemed to serve as a partition between this room and another apartment. It might have been his imagination which had led him to think that, when his hostess put her question, this curtain had parted sufficiently in the centre to allow a pair of eyes to peer at him. It might have been fancy—but he did not think so. The movement had been very rapid: looking at the drapery now, he saw nothing to distract his attention further.

He turned, hoping that he had not betrayed any surprise.

"I believe my friend, Miss Valerie Insall, spent the week-end with you at your Surrey place, Mrs. Laidley Craig," he said.

Again he told himself that it might be merely his imagination—but the woman looked startled.

The next moment, however, she had recovered herself.

"Valerie Insall," she repeated; "why, how strange! Yes, she spent the week-end with me in Surrey."

"So I understand from a friend of hers, Miss Maisie Chard. Would you mind telling me if Miss Insall left your house safely?"

The woman became voluble. "Of course she did. As a matter of fact, I saw her off myself. She told me she was going

to the Midlands somewhere—a place near Leicester, I believe. But why such overwhelming anxiety, Mr. Holiday, even allowing that you are a friend of this very charming and delightful girl? Isn't Miss Insall capable of looking after herself? She certainly gave me that impression whilst she was at The Barn."

Mrs. Laidley Craig had made a false move. It did not require the quiet cough which seemed to come from behind the curtain to inform Holiday of the fact; he was aware of it himself. There was a febrile excitement possessing the woman which could not be natural.

He pretended not to have heard the cough, and he likewise ignored the peculiar nervous tension of his hostess.

"Would you mind telling me what time Miss Insall left your house?" he asked.

The woman, puffing fiercely at her cigarette, replied to the question quickly—too quickly.

"That's easy enough to answer," she said; "we had tea yesterday at ten minutes to four exactly. Miss Insall had her two-seater brought round at five minutes past, and she drove straight away. That is all I can tell you, I am afraid, Mr. Holiday." She rose, signifying that the interview was at an end.

"I am very much obliged to you," the visitor said. "Part of my anxiety and pertinacity can be explained, perhaps, when I say that I had an arrangement to dine with Miss Insall last night on her return to Town. I have had no message cancelling the appointment, and I knew nothing, conse-

quently, of her sudden decision to go to the Midlands." The woman, he was convinced, was not keeping to the truth—on the other hand, she showed pretty good evidence of being a liar—and he saw no shame in matching lie with lie. The need was too urgent to stand strictly on scruple.

"Oh, I quite understand, Mr. Holiday," said Mrs. Laidley Craig vivaciously; "if I were a man, I should envy you your friendship with such a charming girl. And now, if you will excuse me . . ."

Half an hour later Holiday was back in his own flat. A copy of the *Star* was spread out before him. He stared at the headlines:

ABANDONED CAR MYSTERY

STRANGE CASE OF A MISSING MOTORIST

A disturbing discovery was made early this morning near the Leicestershire village of Mortkindale, when a two-seater Singer car, carrying a London registration number, was discovered abandoned at the top of a steep incline leading to a large lake which has earned an ill-famed notoriety of recent years through the number of suicidal acts that have been committed there.

Complete mystery surrounds the circumstances at the moment, but arrangements are being made to have the lake dragged.

The police are reticent, but it is understood that the possibility of foul play must not be ignored.

When he rose to cross to the telephone, it was as though the room had gone bitterly cold. He asked the exchange to put him through to the Ritz Hotel.

"This is Holiday speaking. Sorry to bother you again, Miss Chard, but do you happen to know what car Miss Insall drove?"

The answer came promptly.

"Why, sure—a Singer. A good little car it was, too; I've ordered one myself."

"You are positive it was a Singer?"

"Positive."

"Do you happen to know the registration number?"

"No, I don't. Why the relentless cross-examination, may I ask? If you could only see how little I have on at the moment—now you'll be shocked, I suppose, Mr. Holiday?"

"Not at all. I won't trouble you any more."

But she did not ring off.

"Mr. Holiday, have you any news of Val Insall yet?"

"No. I have spoken to Mrs. Laidley Craig and she has told me that Miss Insall did spend the week-end at her country house, but that she left for the Midlands at tea-time yesterday."

"Well, I shouldn't worry any more, then. Good-bye; I really must get dressed—I shall catch pneumonia if I stay here any longer."

"Good-bye—and very many thanks."

Replacing the receiver, Holiday walked back to his chair. It was a time for clear thinking, and yet his brain was in a whirl. The passage in the newspaper report, "Arrangements

are being made to have the lake dragged," conjured up a picture of stark horror before which his mind recoiled in mingled disgust, fear, and bitter anger.

So Mrs. Laidley Craig had been correct. Valerie Insall had left that Surrey country house to go to the Midlands. What purpose she had in mind it was impossible, of course, to say. Of one thing he was certain, however: she had not abandoned her car in order to commit suicide. That theory was simply incredible.

He pushed the newspaper on one side and slowly filled and then lit a pipe.

There was another side to the picture, and he was studying it now. According to the evidence furnished by the evening paper, Mrs. Laidley Craig had told the truth. And yet——

There were these questions to be answered: (1) *Why had the woman displayed such unnecessary agitation?* (2) *Who was the person standing behind the curtain?* (3) *Why had this person coughed?* (4) *Was the cough intended as a warning?*

The last paragraph of the newspaper article sent its challenging message to his brain: "The possibility of foul play must not be ignored."

Superficially, it was absurd. Would the wife of a prominent official at the Foreign Office be a consenting party to a crime of this description? It seemed impossible to credit, and yet——

Suddenly Holiday jumped up. Going to the door, he shouted.

"Somers," he announced when his servant appeared, "I am going away for the night."

The ex-lancer looked at him shrewdly.

"If it's on the old business, sir, I suggest that you had better take me with you."

"You'll be more useful here. Things are developing, and I want you to keep your wits about you. Don't say I am out of Town if anyone should call, but take any messages. If Mr. Bishop should turn up, hand him the note I am going to write. I hope to be back to-morrow; if I can't manage it, I will ring you up."

"Very good, sir. Hadn't you better leave me the address, in case——"

"I'm going to a village near Leicester called Mortkindale. Can you remember it?"

"A village near Leicester called Mortkindale—very good, sir."

Ten minutes later Holiday was out of the house. He had written a note to Bishop explaining that he had gone to Mortkindale because he wished to investigate on the spot Valerie Insall's presumed death.

"You will make sure that no one but Mr. Bishop gets hold of this," he warned Somers.

"I will promise that, sir."

Holiday accomplished the journey remarkably quickly, for he chartered an aeroplane. He found the tiny village, which, in the ordinary way, numbered not more than three hundred inhabitants, throbbing with activity. The place

was besieged by newspaper-reporters who had arrived in anticipation of the dragging of the lake of mystery and death. This work was to be started early the following morning.

So great was the influx that Holiday found it impossible to obtain a bed at the only inn the village possessed.

"Lord bless you, sir," said the landlord, wiping the bar down with a wet rag, "some of these 'ere reporters be goin' to sleep in the stables—bein' young, they don't mind."

"But isn't there a bed to be had in the whole village?" asked Holiday. His nerves were unsteady through strain, and he spoke sharply.

"Not that I knows of," was the irritating, bucolic reply. "Ben," raising his voice to address a cobwebby-looking rustic, who was puffing solemnly at a short black pipe, "you don't know, I suppose, where this gen'l'man could get a place to sleep in to-night?"

The smoker shook his head.

"We be full even to the wash-'ouse," he replied decisively.

Despairing of getting any sense out of such types, Holiday finished his drink and left the inn. As he turned away, a man who had been standing on his left followed him out.

When Holiday was half-way across the village green, this man, increasing his speed, touched the other's arm.

"Pardon me butting in," he said in a pleasant voice, "but I heard about your predicament in the village pub a moment ago. If you would care to accept my hospitality, I should be delighted to put you up. My name is Bedington—James Bedington."

"The novelist?" asked Holiday.

The other nodded.

"It's a compliment to hear that one's name is familiar to a perfect stranger."

"I may be a stranger to you, Mr. Bedington," said Holiday, "but I feel I know you all right through your books. Your mystery novels happen to be my favourite fodder; I don't do much reading of any sort—got too many other interests, I suppose—but when I want a yarn, I always try to get hold of one of yours."

"After that," responded the other, whose face was partly hidden by a soft felt hat, the brim of which was pulled down in front, "I shall insist upon you coming back to my place. I have formed an idea about this so-called mystery, Mr. Holiday——"

"You know me?" exclaimed the other in surprise.

"International sportsmen are far better known to the public eye than second-rate novelists, I would remind you," was the rejoinder. "I have my car here." He led the way forward.

CHAPTER XXVI

AT 11 P. M.

THE two-seater, a somewhat decrepit Fiat, was driven at a fair rate of speed. Through winding country lanes it went, until it stopped outside what appeared, in the darkness, to be a picturesquely situated cottage.

"This is where I am hanging out," announced the novelist cheerfully; "I'm living all alone: I hope you don't mind pigging it a bit? The fact is, when I am doing a book—and I'm on one now—the more secluded I am, the better I'm pleased. But I think you'll be comfortable."

"I'm sure I shall," was Holiday's reply.

It did not take Bedington long to garage the car, and after locking the door of the big shed and putting the key in his pocket, he led the way to the cottage. The front-door opened on to a small, square hall, which in turn opened on to a fair-sized room running the whole length of the house.

"Sit down and make yourself at home, Holiday," urged his host, stooping to shovel some more coal on the fire, which had burned low; "or perhaps you'd like a wash?"

"I think I would."

"You'll have to make do with candles—this is the rustic life with a vengeance; we have no gas or electricity."

"Sounds Arcadian," commented the guest.

"It is—for a bit. After that, you begin to curse; at least, I do. But the couple I've rented the place from wouldn't have any of those new-fangled improvements. This way, old chap."

An agreeable host, Bedington waited whilst the visitor refreshed himself, and then led the way into a room on the left of the short flight of stairs.

"This is where you'll sleep if you approve, Holiday; as a matter of fact, I got the woman who comes in every morning to make up the bed, as I am expecting a pal down to-morrow to stay a few days."

"Suppose he should come unexpectedly to-night?"

"He won't," was the decisive reply; "don't you worry. And now what about some grub?"

"I could certainly do with some."

"Righto. It will have to be something simple—how about bacon and eggs?"

"My dear Bedington," said Holiday, "nothing in this world can be compared to bacon and eggs when a man is really hungry."

The novelist chuckled.

"You're an easy bloke to entertain, I must say," he retorted. "Push on in there," pointing to the sitting-room, "and make yourself at home while I see to the doings."

Holiday stretched himself out in the easy-chair placed on the right of the fireplace. It was certainly a cosy scene. On his right was a piano, on which rested the Aladdin lamp Bedington had lighted. There seemed worse fates than to be

a successful writer with a tendency to rent furnished cottages, even if these were deficient in gas and electricity supplies.

From an adjoining room, which he took to be a kitchen, could be heard sounds denoting culinary labour of some sort. Presently the pleasant smell of frying bacon drifted in. . . .

"A whisky-and-soda?" suggested Bedington.

"If you don't mind, I won't, thanks," replied Holiday. "But I congratulate you on the supper—you seem a man of parts."

The novelist smiled at the compliment.

"Not many, I am afraid. I can scribble a lot of clotted nonsense and cook a bit—but that's about all. . . . Sure you won't have a drink?"

"Quite sure, thank you."

"Well, speaking for myself," declared the novelist, "I can't get on without a drink at night. It helps me to sleep." He poured himself out half a tumbler of whisky and added a little soda to it.

"And now tell me, what's brought you to Mortkindale? You aren't an amateur sleuth, surely?"

"No," was the answer; "I don't go in for amateur detective work like your death-or-glory heroes. But a friend of mine left Surrey yesterday afternoon to go to the Midlands. She drove a Singer car, and when I read in the paper this afternoon that a Singer two-seater had been found aban-

doned near Leicester, I decided to come up straightway."

"I hope your fears will not be confirmed."

"I hope not. According to the police-inspector I spoke to, the affair is a complete mystery so far."

The reply was not encouraging.

"It won't be to-morrow," said the novelist. "Although I don't want to be a pessimist, Holiday, I should not be surprised to find that the Black Lake, as they call it round here, has claimed another victim. To anyone with a suicidal tendency, that beastly stretch of water appears to exercise a malignantly mesmeric effect."

Holiday refused to be convinced.

"My friend, Miss Insall, was the last person in the world to think of taking her life," he said confidently.

"Then it must have been an accident. Anyway, to-morrow will no doubt bring news of some sort. I'm sorry to have been so gloomy. Perhaps I'm unhealthily obsessed by the Black Lake, but the truth is, I'm doing a novel in which it provides a sinister background."

"How interesting!"

"Yes—it was to get the true local colour that I took this cottage. And now, what about bed?—not that I want to hurry you, of course."

Holiday yawned most realistically.

"I feel I could sleep my head off," he replied, rising.

"I can promise the bathroom to be vacant at eight o'clock —I'll call you," said Bedington, handing his guest a lighted candle.

"Thanks very much—good night. Where's your room, by the way?"

"Oh, just here—in case of any burglars, you will only have to knock on the wall."

"All right," laughed Holiday. "Good night."

"Good night, old chap."

Affable fellow, Bedington.

Gerald Holiday's manner, after he had closed the bedroom door behind him, became peculiar. Although he moved about the room whistling softly, he made no attempt to begin undressing. In fact, he did not even remove his boots, whilst his bag remained packed.

As time went on, his conduct increased in singularity. An hour after he had wished his host good night, he was engaged in the peculiar pastime of leaning against the wall which divided his room from Bedington's and snoring loudly, in spite of being very wideawake. He was so wideawake, indeed, that he was straining his ear to catch the slightest sound.

This came very shortly. He heard a faint step outside, and moving with silent rapidity, he left his post and crouched on the side of the bed farthest from the door.

This was opened and a man's figure appeared.

"Holiday," Bedington called.

A snore, which might have come from the bed, was the only reply.

The figure crept forward. There was something sinister

in its movements. Standing over the bed, the right hand was raised——

Before the blow with the loaded stick could be delivered, Holiday, who had worked his way round the bed, sprang. He, too, had been stealthy, and the man whose throat he grasped, emitted a yell of fear. Then, realizing how neatly the tables had been turned, the other concentrated all his attention on defending his life.

Holiday did not want to kill. Not that he had any mercy for this masquerader who had so foully tried to maim him in his sleep, but he wanted information, and he knew he could not get that out of a dead man.

The other fought with tenacious desperation, but Holiday from the beginning had the upper hand. He never allowed his grip on the man's throat to relax; and despite the furious efforts of his opponent, he quickly reduced the other to helplessness. It wasn't a victory of which to be proud, but it would serve his purpose.

The space in the bedroom being somewhat restricted, he dragged the senseless man down the short flight of stairs, searched his pockets for a possible weapon, and throwing him into a chair, stood on guard, a revolver in his hand.

"I want you thoroughly to understand the position," he said to the prisoner when the latter came to, gasping for breath; "you meant to do something unpleasant to me; you perhaps even contemplated burying my dead body in the garden. Now let me tell you this: whatever you were prepared to do, I am determined to go one better—or worse—

whichever way you like to look at it. No, don't open your mouth yet," as the other tried to break in; "you'll have plenty of opportunity to talk in a minute.

"I just want you to realize that I am prepared to go to any length with you—if needs be, I'll finish you. Is that quite clear? Nod if it is."

The man nodded.

"Stadenfeld recently had the laugh over me, but this time I fancy the grin is with me. I knew you were a liar from the beginning—as a matter of fact, I once met Bedington, the real Bedington, in New York, and you aren't a bit like him at close quarters. But I swallowed your story because it suited my purpose. I imagined that Stadenfeld was up to something again.

"I won't waste any further time. I am going to put certain questions to you, and I warn you once again that to get the answers I am quite willing to be thoroughly unscrupulous. One final warning: if you attempt to lie, God help you!"

Holiday drove all through the night. Two factors alone prevented him travelling at a greater speed—one was the comparatively limited power of the engine of the borrowed two-seater, and the other was that he was passing through strange country in pitch darkness.

Had not his anxiety wiped out every other feeling, he might have permitted himself a grim smile of satisfaction. He had not fallen into Stadenfeld's second elaborately-baited trap—honours were now even in that direction. It had been

an ingenious scheme, but it had been staged a little too extravagantly. From the moment the supposed novelist had accosted him, he had commenced to be suspicious, although he had led the other on to think that his only feeling was one of gratitude. The tricks in this game had undoubtedly been scored by him—here he was, using the other's car, whilst the man himself was lying trussed and gagged, awaiting inspection by whichever other member of the gang was due to keep the rendezvous.

In any other circumstances, Holiday unquestionably would have smiled. The ironic humour of the situation would have appealed to him. But, bent over the wheel of the purloined car, his eyes strained to pierce the illimitable blackness ahead, he knew that he had merely won one round in a fight which would be waged to the very death. The abandoned motor-car at Mortkindale had been merely a ruse; it must have been driven there from Wykeham by someone in Stadenfeld's pay. This meant, in turn, that Valerie had been kidnapped.

Everything became plain—and the mental picture which his fevered imagination now conjured up threatened his reason. He could see Valerie driving away from The Barn on her way back to London. She had been wished an affectionate farewell by that snake-woman, Mrs. Laidley Craig—he would be coming to her in a minute—and had no suspicion of what had been planned when—fiendish thought!—she must have been held up in some way and captured. Small grounds had he for congratulation—of those who had taken the field against Stadenfeld and his gang, Peter Traill

was dead, Valerie Insall was captured, and Bishop had spirited himself away. Only himself was left.

The rest of that journey was an ordeal, the haunting memory of which was always to remain with him. As though his mental anguish needed strengthening, he had two breakdowns—once he had to change a tyre, and only a dozen miles or so farther on there was a puncture. So harassed did he become that only a careful examination reassured him about the petrol supply, although he had made sure on this point before leaving.

London or Wykeham?

This was the question he had to decide. He tried to place himself in Stadenfeld's place. Where would be the most likely place for the crook to hide the girl? As Valerie was known actually to have been at Wykeham, it would seem to be running too great a risk to keep her in Surrey.

Against that strong argument there were, however, two counterbalancing facts. He had sufficient knowledge of Aubrey Stadenfeld by this time to know that the more audacious the plan, the more likely was this master-crook to be drawn to it. And, secondly, Stadenfeld would be so confident about him (Holiday) having fallen into the snare, that he would not trouble to alter his arrangements.

Summing everything up, he decided to make straight for Surrey. That was where he would find Stadenfeld, he felt certain. And once he found that human devil, he would force the truth out of him. There would really be an end this time; this tragi-farce had gone on long enough.

Dawn found him at a little village thirty miles from London. An astonished publican, roused from a heavy sleep by a continuous knocking at the door, looked at him in surly amazement.

"I see you are on the phone—I want to get through to London," the man was told; "and if you can get me something fit to eat inside a quarter of an hour, there'll be a pound for you."

The rustic Boniface's ill-humour vanished at the promised payment, and without waiting to reply, he led the way into a small, private sitting-room and pointed to the wall-instrument. Then, lurching away, he could be heard calling in stentorian tones for an unseen "Lizzie," presumably his wife.

It took ten minutes for Holiday to get through to Mount Street, and the news—or rather lack of it—given him by Somers did not improve his temper.

"No, sir," replied the ex-lancer, "Mr. Bishop hasn't called. May I ask where you are speaking from, sir?"

"I'm at a village called Kimpdale in Hertfordshire, but I'm going straight on to Wykeham in Surrey. I want you to ring up Mr. Bishop's rooms and see if he's home. If he is, tell him this: Miss Insall has disappeared; that I believe she has been kidnapped; and that I am going down to Wykeham in Surrey—it's a place near Dorking—to make inquiries. I should like him to join me there immediately. Is that quite clear?"

"Quite clear, sir," came the reply. "I'll repeat it, if you

like." When Somers had done so, Holiday, after a few brief words of thanks, rang off before the servant could put any further questions.

A dish of ham and eggs and a pot of tea—all scalding hot—were ready by this time, and after running his car into a former stable that now served as a garage, Holiday sat down to the meal. His drive through the night had given him a ferocious appetite and he ate and drank voraciously.

Within half an hour he was on the road again, and as he neared London he ignored Stadenfeld and concentrated on the woman he had interviewed the previous afternoon. He recalled once again Mrs. Laidley Craig's agitation, he remembered the warning cough made by someone standing behind that curtain at the end of the room, and he wondered again what part the wife of a high official at the Foreign Office could be playing in this astonishing business. That she had some connection he was positive, for now that he came to look back upon that interview, the conviction grew that the woman must have been lying.

Why? For what purpose? Was it possible that she and Stadenfeld were associated; that they worked together? Could it have been the crook himself who had sent that warning cough from behind the curtain? The idea seemed preposterous, and he would have dismissed it instantly had not everything connected with this affair seemed, on the surface, incredible.

Holiday continued to link up his thoughts. Had his calling on Mrs. Laidley Craig given the warning to the gang? Had this intervention on his part meant——? A cold dread

made him shiver; he stopped, afraid to pursue this particular thought. Then he faced the possible truth: Had he indirectly been the means of Valerie Insall's death? Already she must have been several hours in the power of Stadenfeld.

It would be useless for him to call again on Mrs. Laidley Craig—in London. For one thing, it would show that the other side's plans had gone astray with regard to him, whilst it was a certainty that the woman would refuse to see him.

No; the mystery of Valerie Insall's disappearance had started at Wykeham, and it was from this point that he was going to begin unravelling it.

Nine o'clock had just struck from a neighbouring church when he stopped the car at an inviting-looking inn which swung a sign on which was painted a Blue Boar.

It was because he felt he must have some kind of base that he got out of the two-seater and walked into a sanded bar-parlour.

A stout, comfortable-looking man, wearing a corduroy sleeved waistcoat with gilt buttons, looked up from the newspaper which he had spread out on the shining mahogany bar.

"I may want a room for to-night," said Holiday.

"That'll be all right, sir," was the reply. "Wykeham is a smallish place, but it's worth spending at least one night in, all the same. And you'll be all right at the 'Blue Boar.'"

"In that case, I'll engage the room now," responded the prospective guest with a smile. "Can you garage my car?"

"Yes, sir—good accommodation for man and car; that's my motto. I'll get the missus to show you upstairs."

Having seen—and approved—the spotless bedroom, Holiday superintended the garaging of the purloined car, drank a pint of bitter beer, and set out determinedly.

He was going to seek the truth—and he meant to discover it.

CHAPTER XXVII

THE WOMAN WHO LAUGHED

Valerie came through that black pall of oblivion to a consciousness that was full of pain. Physically, she felt she had been through a long and exhausting illness which had taxed her resources to the uttermost. Her limbs ached, and her head throbbed as though a tiny hammer was working piston-fashion inside her brain. For several minutes after opening her eyes she wished that she might die.

Then the wonderful resilience which belongs only to youth forced her to take stock of her surroundings. A harrowing memory returned: she could see again that long-bodied saloon-car hurtling down on her, could hear the nerve-racking crash of impact. . . .

That collision had been deliberate. It had been planned, prearranged. She had not informed Mrs. Laidley Craig which route she was taking to Town. That meant she had been followed. . . .

Enemies, then, had done this thing.

She had fallen into the hands of those she herself had sworn to ruin!

As the knowledge flashed through her already tortured brain, Valerie attempted to rise. She had not been conscious of the fact before, but now she realized a further disturbing truth: she was a prisoner. Her wrists were bound as well as

her ankles. They were taking no chances. It was a compliment, she reflected grimly, but it made her position terribly real. All chance, all hope had been cut off: she was powerless.

She strained her eyes to see what place this was to which she had been brought. The light was so poor that it took some time for her eyes to become accustomed to the gloom; but when they had done so, Valerie's sense of dread increased. This was no ordinary room—on the contrary, its general appearance gave the feeling that it might well be an anteroom to the grave.

It seemed to be a large cellar—in any case, it was a room underground, for the atmosphere smelt damp, mouldy, and extremely unpleasant, whilst the walls were coated with a noxious, greenish slime. A veritable charnel-pit.

She was still prostrated by weakness, but the horror which increased every minute forced her to attempt once again to get free. Even if she had no weapon but her bare hands, she could put up something of a fight.

But any hope she might have had very quickly died. A man in the full pride of his strength would have been powerless to free himself of these thongs.

Yet long after she knew how vain was the endeavour, she continued the hopeless attempt—she went on until the flesh of her wrists was raw and her gums were bleeding, so desperately had she tried to bite through the thick leather.

In the end, so tired did she become, that her misery was swallowed up in forgetfulness again. Then exhaustion made her sleep.

When she awoke the second time, a number of people were standing round the pile of sacks on which she had been flung. There were three men and a woman. All but one were strangers. This exception she had very good reason to fear; it was the Italian, Benelli, who glared down at her.

The talking, however, was done by one of the men whom she did not recognize.

"No doubt you are wondering why you are here, Miss Insall," said this man. "The question is soon answered: you have been so exceedingly foolish as to attempt to meddle in certain affairs—a proceeding which you must have known from the beginning was dangerous. There is a possibility that you imagined yourself to be very clever, but the laugh, as you now readily understand, is with us. We have waited until the time was propitious and then we have acted. From your point of view, it is unfortunate, of course, that the results of your spying at Beauvallon should be fruitless, whilst it will not add to your peace of mind to know that the man to whom you entrusted those particulars is dead."

Despite the mastery which she was endeavouring so courageously to keep over her composure, the last few words unnerved her.

Peter Traill dead! It was a lie. She could not believe it. But all the same, a spasm of dismay passed through her body.

The sight appeared to afford the speaker and his companions considerable satisfaction.

"I myself had the pleasure of dealing with that meddle-

some young man, Peter Traill," continued the man. "No, details were *not* published in the newspapers—Traill's friends saw to that. By such infantile methods they hoped, no doubt, to lull us into a fresh sense of security. Instead" —he waved a hand—"we have you as a hostage, whilst we are expecting Mr. Gerald Holiday to join us at any minute. Holiday proved even easier to deal with than Traill: as I recently informed him, he is out of his class at this sort of thing; he should have confined himself to hitting a polo-ball about."

This time an involuntary groan came from the girl. Her world was crashing down in ruin. And worse—she was a double murderess, for she would be responsible for the deaths of two men, the two men who had been so loyal and faithful to her. Traill had already been murdered, and Holiday undoubtedly would meet the same fate when he was brought to this place. Her own failure, bitter as it was, became forgotten in the remorse that overwhelmed her.

The voice which struck agony into her soul continued:

"I promised this man Holiday some time ago that he would regret thrusting himself in my way, and now the time has come for me to fulfil that pledge. For what you have done, Miss Insall, you shall be present to see how I deal with obstinate people of this type. . . . I will leave you with that reflection. In case you should feel lonely, this lady has consented to keep you company. Her vigil will not be long."

The speaker, followed by the two other men, left by a door on the opposite side of the room. Valerie heard the scraping of a chair and realized that her gaoler had seated herself a bare foot away.

Directly she heard this woman speak, she knew that she was to prove an even more implacable enemy than that smooth-tongued man who had done so much suave, but deadly threatening. The female of the species. . . .

The woman stooped, and her hand passed over the prisoner's face.

"You are beautiful—your skin is soft and lovely . . . yet how soon will it become loathsome. . . ." Something bright flashed before Valerie's eyes. "You know what that is?" asked the woman in a terrible voice. "It is the means by which all that gracious beauty of yours will be changed so that lover of yours, Holiday, will not be able to recognize you when he comes."

There was a vicious gloating, a mad intensity in the speaker's voice. Although she had not seen her before, Valerie guessed her identity: she was the "Lulu" of whom she had heard at Prince Kuropatin's villa at Beauvallon—a notorious woman of the underworld, a heartless blackmailer. What mercy could she hope to expect from such a creature?

She did not reply. It would be useless to attempt any appeal, and her pride kept her silent.

Laughing vilely, the woman struck her across the cheek with the back of her left hand so that the rings she wore tore the flesh.

Meanwhile, Gerald Holiday, sitting at the wheel of a car he had stolen, was racing towards Wykeham at a speed which anyone else would have declared reckless, but which he himself considered appallingly slow.

CHAPTER XXVIII

AT THE TELEPHONE

A PLEASANT enough looking place it was. Holiday stood for a few moments looking at the wide lawns at the front and back of the house, on which tennis-courts were marked out; he noted the dove-cot and the rose-garden. . . . Surely this could not be the stage? In the morning sunshine it seemed impossible to believe that the grim shadow of murder might be hovering over this typically English country house. Yet in his heart Holiday knew that this dreaming peace was merely so much pretence—a snare to lull the senses and to deaden the mind. There was mystery and tragedy lurking behind those well-kept lawns and flower-beds, whilst Terror raised its ghastly head behind the curtained windows.

During the walk from the "Blue Boar" to the house, he had decided on a plan of campaign. He was determined to take the bold course. Hadn't he been elected to the Secret Service? He would make use of the fact. He did not know exactly what amount of authority he could assert, but it would enable him to put searching questions to any members of the house-party that remained. And what was more, he would search the house. Not that he could hope to find Valerie Insall there, but there might be some clue. In any case, there would be action of a sort. And if anyone threat-

ened trouble—well, he'd welcome that. The bulge in his pocket made by the automatic revolver with which he had threatened the bogus Bedington, gave him a comforting assurance when he touched it.

Without further ado, he opened the gate and walked up the wide, gravelled path to the entrance of the house.

His ring was answered by a manservant, who looked at him inquiringly.

"I am from the police," Holiday told him. "Is Mrs. Laidley Craig here?"

"No, sir. Mrs. Laidley Craig is in London."

"Is Mr. Laidley Craig here?"

"Mr. Laidley Craig rarely comes to Wykeham, sir. He also is in London."

"That is unfortunate——"

"What is it, Compton?"

An alert-looking man who looked in the early thirties had walked through the hall and was standing at the back of the servant.

The latter turned to him.

"This gentleman says he is from the police, Mr. Conolly," he replied. "He wishes to see either Mr. or Mrs. Laidley Craig. I have just told him that both are in London."

"May I inquire your name, sir?" now asked the man, who, by his manner, appeared to hold some position of authority.

"Lisdale," responded Holiday, giving his second Christian name. "I have called on a matter of the gravest importance."

The interrogator raised his eyebrows.

"I am not the kind of fool to attempt putting any obstacle

in the way of the police," he said with a wry smile. "I am Mrs. Laidley Craig's secretary—please come in. All right, Compton."

The servant dismissed, Mr. Conolly walked with the visitor through the hall and opened the door of a room on the right.

"Now, Mr. Lisdale," he said, his manner deferential, "what can I do for you? In the first place, however, permit me to apologize for the absence of Mrs. Laidley Craig. She was here for the week-end, but returned to Town yesterday."

Holiday nodded.

The other continued:

"I can scarcely understand what has caused you, as representing the police, to have called, Mr. Lisdale, but of course I shall be pleased to render you all the assistance possible. As I have already said, I am Mrs. Laidley Craig's private secretary."

Again the visitor nodded.

Holiday was trying to think where he had seen this deferential person before. There was a vague impression at the back of his mind that he had come across this perfect specimen of a private secretary somewhere—was it in the South of France or on a boat crossing to the States?—but he could not place him in any particular spot. That he did not like the fellow was due, he endeavoured to believe, not to the man's association with Mrs. Laidley Craig, but because of his own personality.

"I'll come straight to the point," he started.

"Do! Please do! Believe me," twittered Mr. Conolly,

standing first on one leg and then on the other, "I find this suspense somewhat trying. I trust"—he laughed like a man whose nerves are threatening to give way—"that I do not come under the list of suspected persons?"

Holiday ignored the foolish remark.

"I want you to tell me exactly what time Miss Valerie Insall left this house on Monday afternoon," he countered swiftly. Having this man alone, he meant to impress him. In order to do this, he took up a position so that Conolly could not possibly attempt to leave the room without passing him.

He had half-expected to see the secretary jump, but nothing of the kind happened.

"Miss Valerie Insall——" Conolly repeated, as though this was the first time he had heard the name.

"Miss Insall, perhaps I should inform you," said Holiday, his voice heavy with sarcasm, "was one of the guests staying here at Mrs. Laidley Craig's invitation during the week-end."

The other's face cleared.

"Then that explains why the name was not familiar to me," he replied quickly. "You see, I was in London during the week-end."

"Did you not know that Miss Insall was amongst the week-end visitors?"

"No; Mrs. Laidley Craig often extends invitations to spend the week-end in Surrey without notifying me. She is impulsive—it is a well-known characteristic of hers."

"If you were not here during the week-end, I want to speak to a responsible servant who was."

"Certainly." No one could have been more obliging than Mr. Conolly, who walked to the fireplace and pressed a bell.

"I will call Compton, who acted as butler during the week-end," he added.

"You will please allow me to do the questioning, Mr. Conolly," said Holiday.

"But of course—I am entirely in your hands." The speaker looked as though, given a sign, he was prepared to go down on his hands and knees in submission to the other's authority.

The manservant who had opened the door to Holiday now entered the room.

"Compton——" started the secretary, when he was cut short.

"I understand you were here during the week-end, Compton," said Holiday.

"Yes, sir."

"Do you remember all the guests?"

"I think so, sir."

"Can you recall a young lady named Miss Valerie Insall?"

"Very well, sir. Rather quiet—very charming, if I may say so, sir."

"What time did she leave on Monday?"

The answer came pat.

"Directly after tea, sir—as near as possible, about ten minutes past four."

"Did you happen to hear where she intended going?"

"I imagined she was returning to London, sir—that is," quickly, "until I overheard Mrs. Laidley Craig telling some of the guests that she was motoring to the Midlands."

"You know nothing more than that?"

"No—nothing, sir."

The fellow appeared honest enough, and Holiday allowed him to go.

When Conolly and he were alone again, he smoked the cigarette he had lighted to the end. The secret was in this house somewhere—of that he was convinced—but how to get at it? That was the problem. The man back at Mortkindale had been able to tell him only so much—that consisted of the instructions he had received from Stadenfeld to incapacitate Holiday and keep him there, powerless, until he received further instructions. Of what had happened to Valerie Insall he swore he knew nothing. He had persisted in this in face of all threats, and at last, hating the job he had set himself, Holiday had left off bullying him.

"Is there anything further I can do?" asked Conolly at last.

Holiday eyed the man intently. There *was* something about him vaguely familiar.

"Have I ever seen you before?" he inquired.

The secretary shook his head.

"To the best of my knowledge, Mr. Lisdale, I have never seen you until now. But then," with a high-pitched nervous laugh, "I am not in the habit, of course, of associating with the criminal classes. If there is nothing else I can do to assist you——"

The tone was as polite and as deferential as before, but the inference was plain.

"I have a great deal of work to get through," the speaker continued.

Holiday felt several kinds of a fool. The thought angered him.

"I shall have to search the house—I am by no means satisfied," he said. There was no make-believe about his expression: he might have been an American stage detective.

This time the secretary's face did change. All the colour seemed drained out of it.

"Search the house," he repeated.

"You heard what I said," snapped Holiday. "Miss Insall, who is a very great friend of mine, has disappeared. She vanished on Monday afternoon after leaving this house. God help you, Conolly, if you are keeping anything back from me!"

All the pith seemed to go out of the man's legs. He stumbled forward, and if he had not clutched a table, he would have fallen.

"I cannot credit what you are saying," he faltered; "I swear I know nothing—nothing——"

The tenseness of the atmosphere was broken by a faint buzzing sound.

"The telephone," explained the secretary, endeavouring to get a grip on himself. "Excuse me."

He walked unsteadily to a corner, took off an ornate cover, and lifted the receiver to his ear.

"It's Mrs. Laidley Craig," he said, turning his head. "Perhaps you would like to speak to her yourself."

"I would," replied Holiday in a determined tone.

Without waiting, he rushed forward and seized the receiver from the secretary's hand.

"Is that Mrs. Laidley Craig?" he inquired.

But there was no voice from the other end.

Instead, before he could sum up the situation, a smashing blow descended on the back of his head and he utterly collapsed.

CHAPTER XXIX

STADENFELD'S OTHER SELF

George Grainger blinked in astonishment.

"You knew it?" he gasped.

Somers affected an air of superiority.

"I knew it first thing this morning," he replied. "The guv'nor—who's hoppin' about now just as though he was a hen with an addled egg inside 'im—rang me up from some place in Hertfordshire. 'Miss Insall's bin kidnapped,' he says, 'and I'm goin' down to Wykeham in Surrey to see about it.'"

"So 're we," commented the taxi-driver. "I wonder you 'adn't thought of that before."

"Bless the Dook of Argyle!" he exploded. "If you went up into my room now, you'd see my bag already packed. What d'ye think I am—a blinkin' lump of dough? D'ye think I haven't any heart? With the guv'nor runnin' about, simply askin' for it, d'ye think I like to stay 'ome 'ere doin' nothin'? Grainger, me and you's goin' to have a few words if you keep on talkin' like that. Let me tell you this: if you hadn't popped your ugly mug in just when you did, I should have risked the sack by takin' the next train down to this Wykeham place myself. What about *that?*"

"All right! All right!" said the taxi-driver, with an at-

tempt at pacification. "Blimey, I can't get a word in edgeways. Anybody'd think you was the Archbishop of Canterbury talking to one of these 'ere Sunday League workers. Lumme, my mouth's dry with all this jawin', I can tell you." He smacked his lips suggestively.

The hint was not lost on Somers. The ex-lancer, after a brief struggle with himself, retired from the room to return with two pint pewter pots filled with honest ale.

"Well, 'ere y'are," he said, lifting his and looking towards Grainger.

"May all your troubles be little 'uns," responded the taxi-driver.

The next few moments were devoted to the serious business of drinking, after which Grainger returned to the matter under discussion.

"I'll tell you why I called," he said. "Not 'avin' seen anythin' lately of Miss Insall—'er as I think is about the best there is—I takes the liberty of poppin' up to 'er flat (did I tell you that my stand was close by where she lives, near the Market?) this arternoon wiv a few flowers——"

"Flowers?" ejaculated Somers, putting down the empty drinking vessel.

"Flowers, I said," resumed Grainger. "I know I don't look much like a bloomin' Romingeo, and anyway that wasn't in my head, so don't you think it. My only object in callin' was to pay me respects."

"I see," said Somers. "It don't sound exactly right to me, but that don't matter. Carry on."

"There's some as 'as sense naturally and there's others wot

ain't so fortunate," rejoined the other; "but never mind that now. As I was sayin', I calls on Miss Insall to pay me dootiful respects and to leave a few flowers—I'm a great believer in sayin' it with flowers; 'ave you 'eard that one afore? . . . Ha, ha! No, I thought you 'adn't!

"Well, the first thing I sees is the servant cryin'. I can't bear to see a gel cryin', and when I asks 'er wot's the matter, wot d'ye think she says?"

"Don't ask me," retorted his listener cynically, "women'll cry at anythin'."

Grainger took an appreciative swig at his beer.

"I don't like to 'ear anyone who's not married talkin' as bitter about the other sect as that, Somers. But this girl was in real trouble. 'My mistress 'as disappeared,' she says, 'and I'm afraid somethin' terrible 'as 'appened to 'er!' With that I puts a few leadin' questions like, leaves the flowers in case Miss Insall should return, and blows round 'ere to tell your guv'nor."

"You're a bit late with the news," retorted Somers, "but you meant well; I'll give you credit for that."

"Thanks for the nuts," said the taxi-driver, finishing his beer. "I've got the old bus outside; wat abaht it? Do we or do we not go down to this 'ere Wykeham and put it across the dirty dogs?"

"We do," replied the ex-lancer succinctly.

"So you are once more yourself? I am glad."

Holiday, struggling to pierce the fog which remained, emerged from his unconsciousness to stare stupidly at the

speaker. He recognized the man who had declared himself to be the private secretary of Mrs. Laidley Craig.

Then he groaned bitterly. What a cursed fool he had been. Why hadn't he penetrated the other's disguise before? This fellow was not a secretary: his name was not Conolly. He was a crook—a crook by the name of Stadenfeld!

"I perceive intelligence dawning," he heard the other scoff. "Yes, Holiday, you see me now in what I may term my natural and normal self. Being of an imaginative—I might indeed almost add flamboyant—temperament, it has pleased me to go about hitherto like.a modern Falstaff. The false stomach, the protuberant cheeks, the general get-up was adopted with a purpose, of course. It was to establish a cast-iron alibi. It has proved very effective, I am pleased to say.

"I regret that the necessity should have arisen to deal with you so unceremoniously, my dear Holiday," the mocking voice went on, "but you were really beginning to become a nuisance. That idea of yours in pretending to be a detective was not a bad piece of bluff—you're improving, Holiday, you're certainly improving. A week ago, I honestly would not have given you credit for so much initiative and intelligence. Unfortunately, as I dare say you have already realized for yourself, it will not be possible to allow you to exercise any further ingenuity. You escaped from Mortkindale rather neatly, but you will not be allowed a similar latitude here."

Holiday controlled himself sufficiently to ask: "Have you quite finished talking?"

"For the moment, my dear fellow," replied the transmog-

rified Stadenfeld, smiling odiously, "I have. At a later date, perhaps, I will go more fully into my reasons for arranging that little affair at Mortkindale."

"Since you have finished, let me tell you that I shall get you yet." Bound as he was, a completely helpless figure, the threat seemed preposterous, but the earnestness with which Holiday spoke robbed the words of any ridiculous element.

"Still the optimist, I see," scoffed Stadenfeld gently. "Really, Holiday, you should have been cured of that by now. But as you persist in professing a belief in the impossible, let me give you a little information. Your friend, Peter Traill, is dead——"

"You swine—I'll kill you for that!" cried the prisoner, struggling violently.

The crook remained unmoved, the odious smile still playing around his lips.

"Speaking of death," he replied, "you will be further interested to know that we have succeeded in inducing your other colleague, Miss Valerie Insall, to pay us a visit. It is true she did not come of her own free will, but it is sufficient that she is here——"

This time Holiday could only groan.

"Our list will be complete when Bishop arrives. Already the information has reached him, I feel sure, that Miss Insall and yourself are in our hands. The news will act as a challenge to him. The circumstances being what they are, he will come, I am convinced, alone. In other words, he will attempt the impossible, but he will not accomplish it."

The man he taunted made a fresh attempt to get free, but

like the first endeavour, it merely convinced him that there was no possible chance of escape.

"I am willing to back Bishop against you," he said.

Stadenfeld took a cigarette out of a gold case and lit it. The smell of the fragrant tobacco almost maddened Holiday, to whom the thought came that he might never smoke again.

"And I am willing to back myself," the crook replied. "It would be stupid modesty if I held any other view, since I hold the majority of the trumps—including," with a quiet laugh, "the ace of hearts."

Holiday, who knew he referred to Valerie Insall, challenged him again.

"You cannot commit murder in this country, Stadenfeld."

The other blew out a thin cloud of smoke indolently.

"Is that so?" he drawled. "Well, your friend Traill was murdered—since you choose to use the word—and nothing very terrible has happened to me yet, as you can see."

"It will—when I get free; I can promise you that."

"For your own peace of mind—or what remains of it—I would not advise you to entertain that fallacy any longer. You will never leave here—alive or dead. There is so much at stake that, frankly, even I dare not take the risk. I hate to be melodramatic, but you must believe me when I tell you, Holiday, that your end has come. There has been carelessness in the past with regard to you, but no mistakes will be made this time. One concession I am willing to make, and only one: that is that you shall spend the interval of waiting with your fellow prisoner."

Before Holiday could reply, the speaker pressed a bell. Two men, in one of whom Holiday recognized the servant Compton, quickly appeared.

"Show Mr. Holiday our downstairs apartments," laughed Stadenfeld.

The men grinned, as though appreciating the humour, and picked Holiday up as though he had been a sack of coals.

CHAPTER XXX

LOVERS IN PURGATORY

"You shall be present, Miss Insall, to see how I deal with obstinate people of this type."

All through the long hours that passed after she had been left alone again, the words of Stadenfeld had kept repeating themselves in her brain. She realized that the crook had not been trying to frighten her without a cause; some fresh plot, so devilishly contrived that Holiday had not been able to escape it, had been used to snare the man she loved—yes, she admitted the fact frankly now: she loved Gerald Holiday with all the strength of her being. How bitter, now that a horrible death yawned before her, to know that a lifetime of happiness was to be snatched away on the very eve of its realization. . . .

But perhaps Stadenfeld had been bluffing, after all. She tried to gather strength at the thought. Yes, that must be the truth: he had told her that lie about Holiday in order to frighten her—a cowardly cad's trick. But then, some men were like that. Stadenfeld and the man behind him—she would die before she learned that final secret of who this mystery person was—were frightened of what she had been able to discover, and they were going to kill her in consequence. It was because they wished her to eat the bread of

bitterness to the last crumb that Stadenfeld had uttered that lie about Holiday.

Yes, that must be the truth. Gerald Holiday was still a free man—instead of running into their trap, he would be coming presently to rescue her. She laughed softly at the reflection—and then immediately afterwards wondered if her brain were being turned. For that was a mad person's hope; by what means could Holiday have learned where she was?

Yet, fantastic though the hope might be, she persisted in it—wasn't it all she had in life, the only straw to which she could cling? She persisted in it until—the door of the cellar was thrown open and two men entered, carrying a heavy weight which they flung unceremoniously to the floor.

"Someone to keep you company," jeered the foremost man before they both walked out again, banging the door behind them.

Valerie felt her heart become a stone in her breast. In an instant, that hope she had cherished so fondly died; what she had imagined at first to be a sack of coals was a man—and the man was Gerald Holiday! The light was not so bad but what she was able to recognize his figure.

"My dear, what have they done to you?" The words, wrung from her by agony, caused the man to move over on his side. Across the six feet of intervening space the eyes of the lovers met.

"Valerie! Then it was true what that swine said—they have got hold of you!"

"Yes—they ran me down in a heavy car and brought me here—wherever this is."

"I think I can tell you that," he replied quickly; "it must be somewhere near The Barn, the house belonging to Mrs. Laidley Craig. I went there determined to find out where you had been taken, and like a fool allowed myself to be knocked out. Dear God—and I swore to rescue you. . . ."

His anguish cut her to the soul. Here was a man suffering inexpressible agonies. What could she do but forget her own misery and try to console him?

"You mustn't reproach yourself," she said; "something will happen yet."

Holiday shook his head.

"I deserve everything that's coming to me," he replied bitterly. "If they had only left me my revolver. . ."

"Gerald!" For the first time she spoke his Christian name. "My dear, you must have faith; you must believe that God will not allow this to go on; He will not permit us to be killed by these brutes."

"Why?" he asked, and it seemed to him that time stood still whilst he waited for her reply.

"Because—" she started, but then her voice faltered.

"If I believed that you had any love for me, Valerie, I would laugh in their faces when they come."

"My dear," was the answer, "I loved you from the first time I saw you—that night on the Riviera express when you saved me from Benelli."

"Then why—?" he asked, like a man.

"Because, after I had dragged you into this affair, I wanted

to try to save you from any further danger—you had risked enough. Remember, I warned you."

"Yes," he said, "you warned me. It was like you to do that." His voice changed. "Now, I believe that we shall get free; if we were to die now, the very devils in hell would grin. But I don't think they will have the chance. If only Bishop hadn't run away!"

"Bishop!" echoed the girl, with a strained laugh; "I had forgotten Bishop. But what did you mean, dear, when you said he had run away?"

"Perhaps I used the wrong words, but with Traill dead——"

"Then Stadenfeld was not lying. He boasted to me that he had killed Peter."

"Yes, he murdered him. He poisoned Traill in his own rooms, where he called disguised. As I was saying," Holiday added after a pause, "knowing Traill was dead, it seemed strange to me that Bishop should have vanished from London without leaving me a word. The only notice I have received came from a gentleman in the Foreign Office, who told me very severely that I must keep out of this business or be prepared to take the consequences. I rather wish that particular fool was with us now."

"Did that man actually say he was from the Foreign Office?"

"He went farther than that: he stated that he was a private secretary to the Under-Secretary himself."

"I think I know who gave him his instructions—but it was not the Under-Secretary."

"Who was it?"

"Mrs. Laidley Craig. She imagined you might be frightened by that message."

Holiday strained forward.

"That woman is mixed up in this, then?"

"Yes—I am sure she is. Exactly how, I do not know, but I am beginning to guess."

Holiday groaned.

"And I went to her, making inquiries about you. There was someone hiding behind a curtain. . . . I must have given everything away, showing how suspicious I was. She looked on edge, desperate enough to do anything, even——"

"She is not the only one who is desperate," replied Valerie, realizing that the word Holiday had left unspoken was "murder." "These men know that you and I can ruin them through what we know." As she saw his blood-streaked face and torn clothes, she shuddered.

"Oh, my dear," she whispered. "I am afraid—afraid——"

CHAPTER XXXI

AN UNEXPECTED MEETING

"You're the bloomin' officer commanding," said George Grainger. "Wot do we do now?"

Somers shook his head.

"I must think about this," he replied.

The taxi-driver snorted.

"Well, don't take all night—let me remind you that that there young lydy friend of mine, Miss Insall, is p'raps being shamefully ill-treated all this time."

"Shut up!" ordered the ex-lancer curtly. "How can I think with all that row goin' on?"

"I ought to 'ave brought one of those detective stories with me," mused Grainger, unabashed by his companion's severity. "That 'd 'ave told us wot to do."

"It seems to me," said Somers, whose diction had become more refined through anxiety, "that we shall have to break into that house, The Barn."

"Sounds a good start," replied Grainger. "Let it be a lower window, though"—he surveyed a somewhat pronounced frontal corpulency with misgiving—"I ain't so light on my feet as I used to be."

"Yes, that's what we shall have to do," repeated Somers.

"It stands to reason," he went on, supporting his argument, "if we just walked up to the front-door and said we'd called to see Mr. Holiday——"

"Wot abaht Miss Insall?" put in Grainger.

"Well, either or both of 'em," amended the ex-lancer with asperity. "As I was sayin', if we just walked up to the front-door, the show'd be given away at once. Besides, there wouldn't be much excitement in that."

"No; but I bar walkin' along parapets and climbin' up sides of 'ouses—I ain't a blinkin' gymnast, and don't forget it. Since I took to drivin' cabs, I've put on four stone."

Somers looked at the speaker broodingly over the top of his glass of beer.

"Seems to me a pity you came at all, mate," he summed up witheringly.

Grainger exploded.

"All I says is, remember I ain't a tight-rope walker—I ain't built for doin' no cat-burglar stunts. Anythin' else and I'm with yer, Somers, me lad, until hell freezes over." The speaker pulled out from his coat-pocket what looked at first like a gigantic piece of liquorice.

"This rubber stick belonged to a pal o' mine," he explained. "'E's doin' time now for hittin' a copper over the 'ead with it—wot's good enough for a copper is good enough for the blokes we're goin' to meet to-night."

"When we find 'em," put in the severely practical ex-soldier. Somers finished his beer and lit a gasper. "Let's see exactly how we stand," he continued. "We come down to this place, Wykeham, and stop to 'ave a drink at the only pub."

"Naturally," commented his companion.

"You shut your trap, and let me do the talkin'. Actin' cautious-like, we makes a few inquiries, and find from the landlord——"

Here he was again interrupted by the irrepressible Grainger.

"I shouldn't be surprised if 'is Nibs wasn't doin' a bit of listenin'-in," he said. "'Arf a mo, while I go and 'ave a dekker."

He rose and tiptoed to the door. If Somers had not been naturally a serious-minded man, he might have shook with laughter at the sight.

"It's all right," said the sleuth, returning after opening the door of the bar-parlour and closing it again. "But 'urry up with the speechifyin', me lad, because we can't expect to 'ave this place to ourselves much longer."

Somers controlled his rising anger with a masterly effort.

"We find from the landlord," he resumed, "that the boss got 'ere early last night and engages a room. After askin' the way to a house called The Barn, he goes out—and doesn't come back. Which means——"

"That 'e was detained at the 'ouse in question," summed up Grainger, "with or without 'is consent. Without, I should say, because if not, 'e would 'ave sent word to 'is Nibs 'ere, sayin' that 'e was sorry but 'e would be occupyin' another pair of sheets that night. Am I right?"

"For once," reluctantly admitted his companion.

"But all this don't tell us nothin' abaht Miss Insall," pursued the taxi-driver, "and with all doo respect to your

guv'nor, who's one of the best, it's Miss Insall as I'm thinkin' abaht now."

Somers replied with high judicial gravity:

"Where Miss Insall is, that's where we shall find the boss —ain't he in love with 'er?"

"Well, wot I says," answered Grainger, "is, let's get abaht it. At the thought of that girl bein' ill-treated, I'm ready to commit murder."

Somers coughed in warning. But the man who entered, carrying a glass of beer in his hand, must have overheard the last few words.

Both stared at the new-comer. He was an elderly man, very much the worse for wear. With his unkempt appearance and shabby clothes, he looked like one who had been fighting failure all his life and had never succeeded in conquering it.

"Good evening, gentlemen," he said in a low, hesitant voice.

"Evenin'," growled Grainger.

As for Somers, he contented himself with staring fixedly at the man, in whom, such was his present suspicious nature, he saw a possible enemy.

The stranger's manner became immediately suspicious, for placing his glass of beer on the table, he walked swiftly to the door.

Quick as he was, however, Somers was quicker. He was able to intercept the other.

"What's the game?" he inquired sharply.

The reply staggered him.

"Don't be a fool, Somers."

Although the man remained a complete stranger, the voice was different. And somehow it sounded familiar to him.

"Who the hell are you?" he demanded.

"My name's Bishop," was the totally unexpected reply. "See that no one's listening at that door."

Somers had retained his soldier's instinct to obey an order. After looking at the other calculatingly for a moment, he went to the door, opened it, looked out, closed it, and then returned.

"There's no one there," he said.

"Ask your friend to stand by and see that no one comes in," continued Bishop.

Somers hesitated.

"You *say* you're Mr. Bishop," he started, "but——"

"I'm disguised," returned the other impatiently. "I've been across to Paris and only got back this afternoon. I found your message"—pulling an envelope out of his pocket—"and came straight down here. I can understand you being suspicious after what has happened—but you'll be able to recognize your own handwriting, no doubt."

Somers examined the paper which was handed to him. "Yes, sir, that's my writin'," he replied; "sorry to be awkward, but it's a funny go, this is."

"You're right, Somers—which is the very reason I am looking at the present moment like an unsuccessful schoolmaster, or decayed solicitor, instead of my normal self." He glanced at the goggle-eyed taxi-driver.

"Can he be trusted?" he asked in a low tone.

"He's all right—I know 'im," was the ex-lancer's testimonial.

"Then call him over."

"Grainger!"

"I was beginnin' to wonder if I was supposed to be on in this act," grumbled the taxi-driver, lumbering across.

"This is Mr. Bishop, a pal of the boss's—he doesn't look like this as a rule because he's disguised."

Grainger smacked his leg.

"Why didn't I think of that myself?" he said reproachfully. "A pair of check trousis and a big brass watch-chain, and I could 'ave looked a bookie to the life. As it is——"

"As it is," cut in the always practical Somers, "you can stand with your back to that door and see that nobody gets in while Mr. Bishop and me has a chat."

"Is them me orders?" Grainger might have been a Field Marshal asked to do a fatigue.

"If you don't mind, Mr. Grainger," said Bishop in a conciliatory tone.

The taxi-driver executed what he fondly imagined was a military salute.

"Very good, General!" he said. "But when the fun begins to start, it won't be any use tryin' to keep me out of it—I'm tellin' yer."

"You shan't be kept out," was the smiling promise.

With Grainger on guard, Bishop's manner changed.

"Now tell me your story as quickly as possible, Somers," he said gravely.

When the ex-lancer had finished, Bishop nodded.

"It all fits in," he said. "I need not ask you, I suppose, if you are ready to face some danger—very real danger?"

"I'd risk my life any day of the week for Mr. Holiday, sir," was the effective reply.

"And your friend?"

"He'd do the same for Miss Insall—at least, he's kept on sayin' he would—but I'm inclined to believe it."

"Good enough. I was thinking of getting on to the local police, but that won't be necessary now. This has been a personal affair all along, and I want to keep it one."

"Tell me one thing, sir," said Somers. "I guess that the boss—I mean Mr. Holiday—must be somewhere in this neighbourhood, but do you know where he actually is?"

"I believe so," was the reply.

A grim expression came into the ex-lancer's face.

"Then what are we wasting time here for?" he asked.

CHAPTER XXXII

THE HOUR BEFORE

The philosopher has said that life is always two-pence to pay. Hector Pandervell was realizing the truth of this. The present should have been his moment of triumph. Not only was the big *coup* which he had been scheming so long on the point of materialization, but the two persons who had given him considerable trouble were in his hands, and he had only to give the word for them to be finally disposed of. True, murder, as he had recently expounded, was an ugly thing, but, on occasion, it became a necessary precaution. Besides, in this particular instance murder would scarcely be the term applied. "Disappearance" was the word that would be featured in the newspaper headlines, when it became known that Valerie Insall and Gerald Holiday had vanished from London life.

All this, in the ordinary way, would have been agreeable to contemplate, but there happened to be one slight flaw. This took the form of a letter bearing the Paris postmark, which had arrived that morning. At the first glance, the few words scribbled on that sheet of cheap foreign paper had left him unmoved. The impulse he had was to tear the thing up and fling it into the waste-paper basket by the side of his library table. In much the same way might the average person have dealt with a vexatious circular.

At the moment of starting to scrunch the paper up, however, some intuitive prompting caused Pandervell to desist. Instead of destroying the letter, he placed it in a drawer of his writing-table.

Although he had been inclined to ignore the matter as being of no consequence, all through the day it persisted in his mind. It was ridiculous, of course, but the thing commenced after luncheon to worry him. The few words, which had been written so swiftly on that piece of cheap ruled paper that they were almost illegible, drew him back time after time to look at them. They exerted a morbid interest which was rapidly passing into an obsession.

Now, seated at his table, he read them for perhaps the twentieth time.

If you have finished with me,
I haven't finished with you.
TONGUE.

Crude, of course, yet there was a subtle something in the words which was unsettling. A definite threat of trouble lay at the back of them; but it was not this, so much as the uncertainty when and how the blow would fall, that made Pandervell twist his long upper lip between the first finger and thumb of his left hand.

Tongue!

Had that ridiculous name any significance? Had it now assumed any power? Had the discharged butler gone to the police? And had they believed his word? Above all, what

evidence could this man produce? These were the questions which the blackmailer asked himself.

His mood alternated, confidence succeeding unrest and anxiety leaping over reassurance. He reminded himself that he had walked so delicately during the years when he had amassed his huge fortune that not even his most bitter victim could have taken a strong enough case to the authorities for the latter to have acted. No written evidence existed; he never sent letters; when he had a matter of business to be seen to, he called in person. And the actual criminals—the term shocked his sensitive soul, but this seemed a time for absolute frankness—by whom he was surrounded, who were members of his staff, so to speak—the tools who did the work from which his highly strung nature shrank? What about these men and women who acted through him by direct orders of the General Council? He reflected with a reassuring smile that their records were so bad that any possibility of treachery towards himself was out of the question. Their interests, moreover, were too intimately bound up in his own to make squealing a profitable undertaking for any one of them. It was true that Morrison, the man who had failed so badly in the Mortkindale affair, was a recruit who might possibly have to be dismissed, and that the case of Lulu Chartres had been given careful consideration, but for the rest, including Stadenfeld himself . . . no, treachery would merely land them all in penal servitude. As for Lulu —well, after that night she would have developed from a mere criminal into a murderess, and she knew what Eng-

land did to murderesses when they were caught. There would be no further danger in that direction.

His mind returned to Tongue. Why was the man in Paris? Were the police after him? Was that the reason for his squealing—if squealed he had?

The large flabby body with the moon-shaped, pale face and quiet, insinuating voice of his former butler returned to him with realistic clearness. The strange feature was that in this case he had acted as a normal member of Society instead of a—he balked at the word—crook. Directly he discovered that the man had once been in prison, he had given him instant dismissal.

Pandervell recalled the scene, which had taken place in that very room.

"Sorry as I am to give you notice, Tongue, I feel I should be lacking in my duty to Society if I allowed you to remain any longer in my employ. Once having strayed from the path of honesty, you are extremely likely to do so again—and I have no intention that the temptation shall occur in my house. I think that is all."

He remembered now how strangely the pale-blue eyes had looked at him! At that moment the rascal must have been contemplating his revenge. Perhaps he even contemplated endeavouring to blackmail him!—what a cream of a jest!—and that he intended this letter—was it merely imagination that made him feel it had scorched his fingers as he flipped it contemptuously across the table?—as a preliminary announcement! Well, the fellow would have to be quick.

After cleaning up in the Hedingfield business, he would put into operation a plan he had long had in mind. His yacht was already in commission: with the money he had made, he would retire for a while from his usual haunts and take a trip round the world. There must be heaps of things still worth seeing. . . . Not even to himself would Pandervell have admitted that the Paris letter had influenced him in coming to this decision; but the expression on his face was still one of brooding thought as he finally destroyed the paper by setting fire to it and grinding it to powder in an ash-tray.

He had scarcely done this when there was a knock on the door.

"Yes?" he called.

A servant entered.

"Mrs. Laidley Craig has called, sir."

Before his master could make any reply, a woman had pushed past the man.

"All right, Simmons."

The servant withdrew. Pandervell, frowning, placed a chair.

"Such precipitancy is likely to cause comment—and to cause comment is invariably a sign of ill-breeding," he said. "It is extremely distasteful to me."

"I had to come, Hector," the woman said.

Her host raised his eyebrows in a characteristic mannerism.

"Then you must have been successful in obtaining a copy of the new naval treaty with America?"

She shook her head.

"I haven't had a proper chance yet—you must give me time!" she pleaded. "No, that was not why I came here tonight."

"I think you had better explain yourself," Pandervell said severely. "I can imagine no other reason why you should have taken the journey from London."

"Can you not?" she exclaimed hysterically. "Well, according to Stadenfeld, you think of committing murder here tonight—and I have come to stop you."

Pandervell waited a few moments, drumming with his finger-tips upon the polished wood of the writing-table.

"You can scarcely realize what you are saying," he replied at length. "May I ask what power you think you possess to induce me to change my mind?"

She became submissive.

"I didn't mean that—I scarcely knew what I was saying. But I want you to realize the danger. Murder!"—her voice became hushed until it sank to a dreadful whisper—"they hang people for murder, Hector!"

"Who should know it better than the wife of such a prominent Government official as Mr. Laidley Craig?" he inquired. "All the same, these two people, the Insall girl and the man Holiday, must be got rid of. They are dangerous; they know too much. If once they got away from here, we should be ruined. It would be prison for both of us. I, possibly, might escape, but for you there would be no possible hope. Have you thought of that?"

"But it is known that the Insall girl spent the week-end at The Barn," she protested.

"Quite so—but it will be somewhat difficult for anyone, I imagine, to trace her subsequent movements. There is really no cause for alarm; I can assure you of that."

The telephone on his desk rang. Taking off the receiver, he listened attentively.

"That is to announce that the final preparations have been completed. Perhaps you would like to accompany me."

"Where—where are you going?" the woman gasped, hand to her bursting heart.

"To superintend the obsequies of two enemies of ours, my dear lady," was the answer.

CHAPTER XXXIII

THE ANTE-ROOM TO DEATH

Valerie, in making that despairing cry, had obeyed an involuntary prompting too potent to be overcome. She had said she was afraid, and this was the truth. The strange fact was that the presence of Gerald Holiday sapped her courage instead of giving her strength. To see him tortured . . . killed . . . that would be the ultimate horror.

Now only one hope remained, and that was so slender she dared not give it any serious thought. It was a million-to-one possibility—the chance did not seem better than that. From what Holiday had said, Bishop must have left the country. Perhaps he had been sent abroad by his Chief; in which case, unless he broke the promise of secrecy which he had made to her, he would have to abandon her interests and obey the order unquestioningly. Yet in that event surely he would have sent some word? But, perhaps he had done so: the letter might even now be waiting at her flat. She had been away for several days and Mabel, her maid, would not know where to redirect any letters.

Or perhaps, again, Bishop himself was in the snare. It would appeal to the mentality of a devil like Stadenfeld to produce the man, on whom he must know they were expending their only hope, at the last moment. What was it he

had said to Gerald? "No doubt the information that you are both in our hands has reached Bishop; the news will act as a challenge to him." Suppose Bishop had already accepted the challenge and had been taken a prisoner?

She groaned. Her brain revolted against any more thought.

"Darling!" exclaimed a voice.

The word thrilled her so that everything else was momentarily forgotten. Proudly she lifted her face.

"If you could only kiss me——"she said.

Holiday laughed.

"God willing, my dear, I shall kiss you thousands and thousands of times," he replied; "these scum are not going to have everything their own way——"

He stopped. The door of their cellar prison had opened and a number of people filed in.

They made a curious contrast—and a sight in the mass to chill the blood.

First came she whom Holiday knew as Lulu—the woman who had shown him such an insensate and unreasonable hatred. She was like a creature transfigured now, her eyes gleaming as she looked first at him and then at Valerie.

After her was the pallid-faced, furtive-eyed Merritt, the man whom Stadenfeld, back at the Edgware house, had adressed as "doctor." Unlike the woman, he evidenced no interest in the proceedings; he might have been bored by the whole affair.

Following Merritt came Stadenfeld—the new or real Stadenfeld. This man, who did not look a day older than

thirty, although he had crammed so much evil into his life, had the manner of an actor making his entrance upon the stage to play a leading part.

There were two others—a man and a woman. These kept in the shadows near the door. That they did not wish to be regarded as other than spectators was evident, for the man wore a mask which covered the whole of the upper part of his face, whilst the woman was heavily veiled. Yet to Valerie, the identity of both became instantly known—the woman was that arch-traitress, Mrs. Laidley Craig, and the man—astounding revelation!—was Hector Pandervell! So it was that gracious-mannered, cultured-voiced cosmopolitan who had treated her with such charming courtesy on the afternoon of her arrival at The Barn, who was the secret power behind Stadenfeld! She glowed at the knowledge that the circle was now complete; she had all the information she required: Pandervell represented the Chief of the conspiracy, the English head of the Organization whose Riviera headquarters she had been able to penetrate. It was worth all she had gone through to have gained this much. She thrilled afresh until the realization came that it was through this very knowledge that Holiday and herself were to be shamefully put to death.

Waving Lulu Chartres and Merritt on one side, Stadenfeld stood over the prisoners.

"The moment has arrived," he said, looking more than ever like an actor filling a spectacular rôle, "for the final settlement of our little differences. We had hoped that our

mutual friend Bishop would also have been with us, but apparently that pleasure is to be deferred. We must try not to be too disappointed."

He paused before continuing: "Now we do not wish you to think in these, your last moments, that we are unconscionable brutes. On the contrary, the method of your passing over will be swift and practically painless. Our colleague the doctor"—he waved a hand in the direction of Merritt—"whom you, Holiday, at least, have had the pleasure of meeting before, has certain highly developed scientific gifts. These he has been good enough to place at our disposal. Among his recent inventions is a certain chemical compound which when injected has the property not only of stopping the heart's action very speedily—there are many poisons, of course, which will do this—but also of causing the human body literally to disappear; bones, blood, and flesh just vanish, leaving nothing, according to Merritt, but a fine dust which not even the most skilful pathologists of crime will be able to identify. You will see the overwhelming advantage of this, of course—in the past, whilst it has been a comparatively simple matter to kill, it has often been an embarrassing consideration what to do with the corpse. That difficulty I trust the forthcoming test will effectively solve. If it is successful, Science will have scored another signal triumph. Until now, Merritt has not had the opportunity of putting his discovery to a fair trial, and he is naturally delighted at the prospect. He does not appear very pleased, but that is merely his manner: inwardly, I am convinced, he is vainly endeavouring to overcome his elation. . . . Lulu, may

I ask if you are ready? Holiday, you will excuse me if I take the liberty of removing your collar. . . ."

As he felt the fingers of his enemy touch his flesh, Holiday imagined that he must go mad. Yet his pride kept him silent. He could not plead with Stadenfeld, and it was useless to attempt to struggle.

"Darling, forgive me!" sobbed Valerie.

It was the distress of the girl he loved which made him break out into violent speech.

"Stadenfeld!" he cried, hate swelling so that his heart threatened to burst, "you will hang for this!" The man flicked the speaker's cheek with the tips of his fingers.

"A poor satisfaction," he sneered; "I am sure you would much rather be given the chance to settle with me yourself. However, we are wasting time . . . *Lulu.*"

The woman took from Merritt a phial and a hypodermic needle. As she moved towards Holiday, a scream tore the air. Valerie's tortured nerves had cracked at last.

"Keep her quiet!" commanded a voice. It was the masked man speaking for the first time.

Stadenfeld obeyed the order. Taking off his coat, he flung it over the girl's head, and tying the sleeves tightly, made a rough kind of gag.

"Oh, God, I can't stand this!" The veiled woman at the door turned her face away.

The eyes of the murderess were like a snake's as they approached nearer and nearer. Even Holiday's furious hate could not fight the terror which the sight inspired; he felt himself become cold and rigid.

So this was to be the end—to die like a rat in a filthy cellar at the hands of a female thug who took a fiendish delight in the most awful of crimes. A strange, terrible destiny—and yet, in that final moment of life, he had an exultancy of soul which drove out his former terror and made him smile into the contorted face of his murderess.

The change in his face was so unexpected, so inexplicable that the woman, in the act of plunging the charged needle into his skin, stopped.

And in that same instant, a revolver-shot filled the cellar with reverberating sound.

A hideous scream followed so quickly on the revolver-shot that the one started before the other died away. Holiday saw Lulu Chartres lifting the hand which had held the needle. It was now empty, and not a pretty sight, for blood was spurting from it.

"Stand back, all of you—let them go! Do you hear me, let them go!"

Holding a revolver in a shaking hand, and shouting hysterically, Mrs. Laidley Craig menaced the crowd of assassins. It was obvious she was bordering on madness; the scene she had been brought there to witness, following on her former fear, had almost turned her brain. She was thoroughly distraught.

"You she-devil," shouted back Lulu, facing the woman who had fired the shot, "I'll kill you for this!" In her insensate fury she shook her maimed hand so that blood spurted on the other.

It was Pandervell who took command of the situation.

"Steady yourself, Lulu," he commanded, and to Mrs. Laidley Craig: "Put that revolver away! What do you think you're doing?"

Mrs. Laidley Craig laughed hysterically.

"I'm going to prevent murder being done—I can't stand it!—listen to me, I can't stand it!"

The words bespoke raw, tortured nerves.

The next moment Holiday would have cried a warning. But before he could speak, a hand—Stadenfeld's—had closed over his mouth. And whilst he was thus gagged, the thing was done; Merritt, who had slung round to the back of Mrs. Laidley Craig, sprang on the woman from behind like some treacherous creature of the jungle, and brought her to the ground.

"Now we can proceed," said Pandervell. The revolver which he had taken from the woman who had been choked into insensibility, was in his hand. "As Lulu is unfortunately incapacitated, you had better take over, Merritt. The operation should have been performed by you in the first place."

The man he addressed picked up the phial and examined its contents.

"A good deal has been wasted, but there should be sufficient," he commented.

"Get on with it, man!" snapped Pandervell. "Good God! is all the night to be wasted?"

The cosmopolitan had been shaken out of his usual exquisite suavity.

"Very well." Merritt examined the needle.

"What about me? Do you think I am going to stay here

and bleed to death?" Exhibiting the wreckage of her right hand, Lulu stormed at Pandervell. "This stunt can wait; I want Merritt to see to my hand."

"You know where to find what you want," was the stern reply; "fetch the things and Merritt shall bind up your hand. In any case, leave, because your stridency is singularly abhorrent to me." The speaker moved the revolver so impatiently in his hand that all the bellicosity died out of her manner.

"Yes—all right," she said submissively, and without any further protest, left the place.

"Now, Merritt," exhorted Pandervell. "I think, Stadenfeld, that you can permit Miss Insall to breathe freely once again."

Stadenfeld, smiling, stepped across and untied the sleeves of his coat. Valerie's face was the colour of ivory, and her body was perfectly still. With a tremendous feeling of thankfulness, Holiday realized that she had fainted. Nature had stepped in to save her.

"She is unconscious," said Pandervell, after a glance; "well, it cannot be helped. . . . Merritt."

Holiday would not close his eyes; by some strange association of ideas, he thought of an American he knew in the war years, who had been caught inside the German lines and shot as a spy. The officer in charge of the firing-party had written home to the dead man's family in the States, saying: "He died like a hero, refusing to have his eyes bandaged."

He felt the breath of Merritt as the man bent towards him. There was one consolation: the fellow, if he had been a doctor, could be expected not to bungle the job. . . .

There came the touch of the needle on his flesh—and then, from somewhere quite near, a scream that rose and swelled until it died down in a kind of shuddering moan, awful to hear.

"What the devil's that?" he heard Pandervell shout. "Stadenfeld, you stay here."

The speaker thrust open the door, and in the next moment was hurled violently backwards. A grotesque figure—amply paunched, crudely moustached, and mouthing strange oaths—came hurtling into the cellar, swinging what looked like a short black rod in his hand—a rod, however, that was as pliable as the body of a snake.

"Miss Insall!" this apparition shouted, and when he saw the unconscious body of the girl, "by Gosh!"

Both Stadenfeld and Merritt were transfixed by the unexpected sight of this intruder, and before they could recover from their surprise, a voice that stung them like a whip-lash sounded from the door.

"Put your hands above your head—both of you! Get a jerk into it now, for I've already lost my temper!"

Holiday did not recognize the speaker, but he knew the voice.

Bishop had turned up, after all. The million-to-one chance had come off. He asked for nothing more; he was quite content.

It was four hours later—in Holiday's flat. Much had been done in that time. To begin with, Pandervell, Stadenfeld, Merritt, and the woman Chartres were in the hands of the police. To a thoroughly bewildered Surrey police inspector the distinguished quartette had been delivered by Bishop—now stripped of his disguise and speaking with the crispness of authority.

"But one of these men is Mr. Hector Pandervell," expostulated the inspector; "Mr. Pandervell is one of the most distinguished——"

"Crooks, not only in Surrey, but in the whole of Europe," cut in Bishop; "I'll just phone through to London and get Scotland Yard to speak to you themselves."

What Scotland Yard said after Bishop had got through to Eden Leycester was sharp and to the point; the inspector was to be responsible for the custody of the four prisoners until a police-wagon arrived from London.

"I suppose Mrs. Laidley Craig should have been included with that precious bunch," said Bishop, drinking the excellent coffee which had rounded off the hurried meal prepared by Somers, "but the scandal will be blazing enough now, once the newspapers get the least inkling of this affair. Anyway, I turned a blind eye on the woman and she slipped away. It would be interesting to know what account—if any—she will give her husband of to-night's proceedings."

"Before you start telling us anything," said Holiday, "there is just one question I should like answered: What was the place where Valerie and I were taken?"

"It was a large cellar buried away below a lodge in Pandervell's grounds. No," with a grin, "I'm certainly not going to tell you anything else to-night—not even how I found it out, or how I got inside. I should imagine you have had sufficient excitement for one evening. Valerie, my dear," turning to the girl, "I'm going to take you home straight away; you look as though you wanted at least a week's sleep without any interruptions. Let me remind you that it's 2 A. M., and that I have to go on to see the Chief before I go to bed myself. As a matter of fact, he's waiting up for me."

Valerie rose and smiled at Holiday.

"I suppose I shall have to obey this bully, Gerald?"

"You have my permission to do so to-night, but from to-morrow you obey no one but me."

Bishop grinned at the sight of the colour mounting in the girl's cheeks.

"Like that, is it? Well—before I forget it—congratulations!"

"Thanks, old man," replied Holiday. "If it hadn't been for you—but, oh, what's the use . . . ?"

When Somers entered the room to clear, he saw his master shaking Bishop's right hand whilst Valerie had hold of the other.

Bishop looked over the girl's head.

"Is Grainger still on the premises, Somers?"

"If the food he's got through hasn't killed him, sir."

"Good! Tell him he is engaged to drive Miss Insall home."

"When do I see you again?" Holiday asked Bishop as they shook hands for the last time at the street-door.

"I'll call round to-morrow afternoon and finish the story," was the reply.

"Good night, Jerry, dear," said Valerie.

After she had gone, Holiday lifted his face to the stars he had believed he would never see again.

CHAPTER XXXIV

BISHOP TELLS THE TRUTH

"It is a somewhat astonishing story I have to tell," continued Bishop, pulling at the pipe he had lit. "It centres, in the first place, around that disgusting crime, blackmail, which more than one judge has recently remarked platitudinously is nothing short of moral murder.

"Blackmail is one of the oldest of crimes, of course, but it has lost none of its potency through the ages. The man, or woman, with knowledge of the guilty secret, who wields the threat of exposure is always to be feared—especially if the persecuted person occupies a high position.

"I should regard Hector Pandervell as the leading blackmailer of our time, which is peculiarly prolific in the noxious breed. Certainly he was the finest artist. Rarely appearing on the stage himself, he yet held London Society—or a very prominent part of it—in a grip of velvet-gloved iron."

"But how?" put in Holiday.

Bishop smiled as a professor might have done in enlightening a favourite pupil.

"That is soon told," he said; "if you cast your mind back to the war years, you may remember that in a fabulously sensational *cause célèbre,* reference was made to an infamous volume styled 'The Black Book.' In this vast dossier, for it

was reputed to be nothing lèss, the German Secret Service were supposed to have entered certain discreditable particulars concerning various prominent English personalities. The presumption was that the enemy intended to use this information in order to exert pressure upon these people and force them to become traitors in one of many ways."

"That was only a yarn—and a pretty tall one at that," scoffed his listener.

"I know it to have been true," was the serious rejoinder.

"What?"

"I have seen the Black Book, which is now in the possession of the British Secret Service," went on Bishop, unruffled. "Shall we return to Pandervell?"

Holiday nodded, feeling a fool.

"Hector Pandervell's idea, therefore, was not original. He merely copied the German hound in whose sink of a mind this method of blackmail on a colossal scale was first born. Moving in the highest circles, he naturally got to know about the private lives of many people. The better the breed, the more exotic men and women are likely to be in certain respects, and the secret propensities and weaknesses of certain famous men and women were so much grist to this polished ruffian's mill. Such secrets formed his working capital."

"Good God! How utterly vile!"

"Vile, as you say, but you can depend upon it that Pandervell, whose family is one of the oldest in the country and who himself was educated at Eton and Christchurch, moved with circumspection. His soul was unspeakably rotten, yet

he never forgot that he had been born a gentleman. . . . But the money he must have made! Try to imagine it for yourself: dozens upon dozens of Society people paying hush-money. . . ."

"Didn't anyone know who was putting on the pressure?"

Bishop laughed as he relit his pipe.

"Of course! Everyone knew—and everyone was afraid to turn him away from their door. He had the whip-hand; they were his creatures."

"I see. Listening to you, Bishop, is like being in a hothouse filled with poison. Then this woman, Laidley Craig, was blackmailed?"

"Yes. She was a very good client to Pandervell—quite one of the best he had. You see, the unworthy Hector traded in a good many illicit things—diplomatic International secrets for one. When the wife of a prominent official at the Foreign Office got into his clutches, he made good use of her. For one thing, he supplied her with drugs. These were mostly synthetic, made by the disgraced doctor and scientist, Merritt, in that house at Edgware, but mixed with a percentage of the real stuff, they served their purpose. And now I come to the crux of the story, for this is where Valerie Insall comes in."

Holiday leaned forward in his chair, his face alight.

"Go on," he said eagerly.

"Valerie Insall had a brother. Keith Insall used to be at the Foreign Office. He was a brilliant young man, and he rose as rapidly as the regulations would allow. Six months

ago there was some trouble—very bad trouble. There were certain leakages—valuable documents were known to have left the department. The blame fell on Insall—there was a certain amount of what looked, at the time, like circumstantial evidence, you understand—and he had to resign, protesting his innocence all the time.

"Sick of England, he left the country and crossed to America, where he joined the staff of a big New York newspaper, the *Times Bulletin,* at a prodigious salary, and quickly gained a big reputation as a writer on International politics. The night before he sailed from Southampton he vowed to me that, whether his reputation was ever re-established or not, he would never return to England. He spoke in his haste like any of us might have done in similar circumstances, but I have just sent him a cable, adding my entreaties to those of his sister, and—well, I shouldn't be surprised if he now went back on his word. The letter which Mrs. Laidley Craig left behind before committing suicide last night, definitely establishes his innocence in the Foreign Office scandals. She takes the blame for everything."

"There was something of the sportsman in her after all, then."

Bishop nodded.

"But she caused an unholy amount of mischief before she stretched out her hand for that glass of poison," he added; "poor old Laidley Craig! I understand he has offered his resignation to the Foreign Secretary. Of course, it won't be accepted; in spite of the terrible scandal, his own reputation is entirely beyond suspicion, and what is more, there isn't

another man in the country who could do his work half as well."

"I have already forgotten Mrs. Laidley Craig," remarked Holiday; "I thought you were going to tell me about Valerie Insall?"

Bishop smiled across at him.

"Can't you supply the blanks yourself, old chap?" he asked.

"Some of them, perhaps; but I want all the missing bits filled in, if you don't mind."

Bishop, with what to the speaker seemed exasperating slowness, filled and lit another pipe.

"After seeing her brother off on the *Mauretania,* Valerie Insall came straight back to London and telephoned poor old Peter Traill and myself. She wanted to see us immediately, she said. I should explain, perhaps, that Traill had been to Repington with Keith Insall and they had remained close pals ever since. I came into it because I was Peter's friend and colleague.

"I shall never forget that talk. Valerie, whom I had looked upon until then as a quiet, typical English girl of her class, was like someone possessed.

" 'Keith is innocent,' she said, 'and I'm going to prove it!' She walked restlessly up and down the room whilst she was talking.

"Peter, who had been desperately in love with her for years, became terribly anxious.

" 'What do you intend to do?' he asked.

"Bit by bit it came out. She was going to get on the track

of the crooks who had been the means of ruining her brother and expose them. And she was going to do this entirely on her own.

"You can imagine how impossible it sounded, coming from a girl whose only knowledge of criminals up to then had been gained from reading novels and seeing films and plays, and Traill did his best to try to dissuade her. But she would not listen; his most powerful arguments were useless. At the end she smiled—I tell you, Holiday, it thrilled me to see that smile. It reminded me, ridiculous as it may sound, of a martyr going to the stake in the Middle Ages.

" 'It is useless for you to try to stop me, Peter, dear,' she replied.

"The next we heard of her was from Paris. Somehow or other—she didn't go into details—she had got a clue, she said, and was following it up. Of course, on the face of it, the thing seemed absolutely incredible. By what miracle could an inexperienced girl like Valerie Insall hope to fathom a problem which had baffled some of the best brains in the Secret Service?

"But apparently she was on the right track—and with that, after wiring her to be careful, Peter was forced to be content. You see, Traill was in a devilishly awkward position—he was afraid to press her too hard in case she should become desperate."

"Why didn't Traill and you help her out on this job?"

"We couldn't," was the prompt reply; "we were both busy at the time on a very important and delicate investigation and we couldn't leave Town. We were tied to London.

Valerie was working as a free-lance; moreover, she had made us both promise that we would not mention anything to our Chief, Eden Leycester, or to anyone else in an official position. After the disgrace, you can understand why. Really, the girl was in a damnably awkward position. She was working outside the law, as it were. That was why everything had to be kept so secret—even from you. The arrangement was —I agree it was not at all a desirable one, but I have already explained how helpless we were—that if, and when, Valerie obtained any information which was likely to prove valuable, she should forward it to me in London, the reason for that being that I should not be suspected so much as Traill, who was likely to be known as a friend of hers. Anything else?"

"I should think there was! Why did you clear out of London, for instance, without leaving any message?"

"That's soon answered," replied Bishop, with a smile. "I was ordered to Paris on a secret mission. It was impossible to let anyone know where I was going. No doubt," he admitted, "I should have passed the word to you when I got to Paris, but as a matter of fact, I rather wanted to spring a dramatic surprise. After poor old Peter's death, I considered it was very much up to me to bring Stadenfeld down with a crash—I didn't know at that time who was at the back of the fellow, although I guessed there was someone higher up."

"You're still very mysterious."

"Result of many years spent in tortuous ways, my lad. But I'll expound: whilst I was in Paris, a man called one night at my hotel. A greasy-looking rogue who gave the name of Tongue. He was a shrewd customer. He challenged me

straight away with being connected with the British Secret Service and said he had some extremely valuable information to sell—at a price.

"Go on," said Holiday eagerly.

"After listening to what he had to say, I decided to become a purchaser. The man produced evidence to show that he had formerly been employed by a certain Surrey gentleman by the name of Hector Pandervell. I knew Pandervell as a clubman and Society ornament, of course, and at first I scouted the man's story as being impossibly melodramatic. But, as I have said, the fellow was shrewd—he went on to prove to my satisfaction that Pandervell was not only a blackmailer of the very highest class, but that he was linked up with Stadenfeld and Benelli. After that, I naturally took notice."

"You didn't know at that time that Valerie had been kidnapped by the swine?"

"No. But Tongue, after I had paid him a deposit, told me that her life had been threatened by Pandervell, who would take the first opportunity, he said, of having her put away. Then he told me about Pandervell's house near Wykeham, of a certain secret underground cellar beneath a lodge in the grounds, and of a way to get in. Hurrying back to England, I read of the supposed 'suicide' of Valerie near Leicester, knew it to be a blind, and went straight to Wykeham, where in the 'Blue Boar' I met your man Somers and that very stout fellow, George Grainger. I enlisted them straight away—the rest you know. Any other little points?"

"What made Stadenfeld go about like a 1929 Falstaff?"

"Stadenfeld used to be an actor. The masquerade must have appealed to him. He'll have the warders at Dartmoor for an audience now. . . ."

"Just one more question: Why did you call in the police that night in Taviton Street?"

"Well, the essential point was to get Stadenfeld under lock and key. Afterwards, I intended to tell Leycester as much of the truth as Valerie would permit.

"And, talking of Valerie, here she is."

CHAPTER XXXV

THE WAY HOME

Looking as radiant as though she had come from a ball, instead of the very jaws of death, Valerie smiled upon the two men.

"Am I intruding?" she asked; "because if so, I can go back to my shopping."

Whilst Holiday sprang up to cut off her retreat, Bishop reached for his hat, which he had placed on the table.

"Shopping, woman!" he said scoffingly; "you confess to having a soul so mundane that you can talk about shopping when I have been doing nothing for the last half an hour but hymn your praises! And now," with a good-humoured grin, "I have to push along. If you've nothing better to do, Holiday, we'll have a spot of dinner together to-night—no, not to-night, to-morrow night—you are pretty certain to be fixed to-night. 'Bye, Valerie; all the luck in the world."

He smiled with impish whimsicality as he approached the girl. She, on her part, placing both hands on his shoulders, drew his face down and kissed him on the forehead.

"God bless you, old chap!" she replied—and Bishop, for once without a rejoinder, hastened away like a confused schoolboy.

For several minutes after they were alone neither spoke.

Then:

"And how can I thank *you?*" Valerie asked.

"I have already had far more reward than I deserve."

She looked at him as though she did not understand.

"To see you standing here fit and well," Holiday continued quickly, his voice unsteady with the feeling he was doing his utmost to suppress. "Valerie, if Bishop hadn't turned up!"

She shuddered.

"Don't, dear—I can't bear to think about it."

"No, all that is done with." He came closer and looked into her eyes. She gave him back glance for glance, and although her lips trembled, it was happiness he saw mirrored in their deep-brown depths, and neither doubt nor evasion.

Suddenly the spell was broken.

"I suppose Bishop has been telling you all the mysteries," she asked, sitting down on the wide, comfortable leather divan.

"Some of them," was the reply.

"How I hated keeping you in the dark, but I was forced to do it," the girl went on. "It was not that I didn't trust you, but I was feeling my brother's affair so keenly that I could not talk about it. I had determined to keep everything secret until I had solved the mystery." She turned to him. "Can you understand?"

"Perfectly."

"The only people I dared take into my confidence were Peter Traill—poor old Peter, to have died through me!—and his friend, Stanley Bishop. Even you——"

"But I was a stranger," Holiday rejoined; "there was no reason why I should have been given your confidence."

"Few men, I am thinking, would say as much," she replied; and then, sighing, she leaned her head against the back of the divan.

"Being here, free, is like awakening from a hideous dream," she said; "it is almost impossible to believe it is true." For a moment it seemed likely that, swayed by the reaction, she would break down, but she pulled herself together again with a courage which Holiday knew now was wholly characteristic.

"If this story were ever printed—what a newspaper sensation it would create," she continued; "but of course it never will be. Hector Pandervell will go to prison, unheralded and unsung; he will languish in very truth in 'unlettered obscurity.' Did Bishop tell you he was the English head of an International group of blackmailers?"

"He said he levied blackmail on a pretty high percentage of London Society."

"Yes, he did that, but the ramifications of the gang went farther afield than London. And to think I was deceived by the man—when he was introduced to me by the Laidley Craig woman, I imagined he was one of the most courteous and kindly persons I had ever met! But how was I to know? His name was never mentioned in my hearing at the Beauvallon villa by the Prince Kuropatin crowd——"

Holiday bent over her.

"How I hate to hear you talking about those things," he said earnestly.

"It is all over now," she replied; "I am like a child lying safe in its mother's arms, recounting the perils it has passed on the way home."

"'The way home,'" Holiday repeated softly. "Do you know the way, Valerie, or shall I show it you?"

She looked up at him; then her arms became outstretched.

"I think I already know," she replied. "But, still—I'd love for you to show me."

"Dear Lady of the Night," he murmured brokenly, and kissed her as he had so often dreamed he would.

A NOTE ON THE TYPE IN WHICH THIS BOOK IS SET

This book is set on the Linotype in Granjon, a type which is neither a copy of a classic face nor an original creation. George W. Jones drew the basic design for this type from classic sources, but deviated from his model wherever four centuries of type-cutting experience indicated an improvement or where modern methods of punch-cutting made possible a refinement that was beyond the skill of the sixteenth-century originator. This new creation is based primarily upon the type used by Claude Garamont (1510-1561) in his beautiful French books and more closely resembles the work of the founder of the Old Style letter than do any of the various modern-day types that bear his name.

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